

Fate Be Changed

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Summary: For once, it's not the wisps that change Merida's fate. It's her arrows. Fleeing from the castle after a night of frustration, Merida decides to let off some steam - and gets a lot more than she bargained for. [Merida/Hiccup, Mericcup!]

1. Chapter 1

The young princess left the castle in the same manner that she usually did: tears and pride stinging her eyes, bow gripped furiously in fist; all signs pointing to another common occurrence - Merida and Queen Elinor were once again at each other's throats. The love and understanding found between the pair during their last frightful escapade had never wavered, but there were just some things they'd never see eye-to-eye on; the evening had begun with a simple request - 'No weapons on the table'! - and had descended into chaos and harsh words, mostly concerning the witches spell. Guilt was now the greatest and most cutting weapon in Queen Elinor's arsenal, and Merida was still too emotionally raw to fight it. Every time the word 'bear' came up, all Merida could do was flee, once again escaping into the cover of night on the back of her trusty Clydesdale. Angus wasn't a horse, really, he was her best friend, the kind that was so in tune with her emotions that he would rear his head and stand to attention as soon as she took her first step out of the heavy castle door. Angus was so accustomed to running now that he ran up to meet her, and Merida leaped onto him without a second glance, burying her head almost deep enough in his black fur to silence the sound of Elinor calling her name.

The pair tore off into the woods, Angus putting as much distance between the castle and the girl as he possibly could, just waiting for the moment that her tears would stop dampening his skin. Eventually, she did lift her head, making sure to place a grateful kiss on the horse's neck before her lips twisted into a scowl. "Did she no learn anythin', Angus?" Merida declared bitterly, notching an arrow on her beloved bow. She peeled the arrow back and let it go

flying into the forest - she'd find it tomorrow, but for now, she didn't care where it landed. Solace could usually be found in the sound of her string being pulled taut, the wind zipping through her hair and his fur, but all of it was not quite enough to quell the sadness that had turned to anger. Aimless shooting was nothing compared to the thrill of hitting a target. Clearing her mind and breathing in deep, Merida notched another arrow, pointing it straight into the sky. "Gimme somethin' tae shoot at, gimme somethin' tae shoot at..."

A black shadow obscured the stars.

She shot.

The resulting howl was nothing like she'd ever heard before. Birds were great target practice and she'd killed her share, and they never, ever sounded the way that did. With great wanting and sick pride, Merida watched as the black shadow tumbled from the sky, listening as its body tore through the trees as it fell. She sighed contentedly. "Let's go find it, Angus. Dinner wasnae that good tonight anyway." Once again, Angus ran, Merida's rage diminishing with every stride he took. She was almost calm before she realized that the path of destruction they were following was much more damaged than a large bird could cause. Broken branches littered the way, and with a sick knot forming in her gut, she noticed that small rabbits and squirrels were running from the direction they were headed, owls cooing ominously as they flew far above the now-broken treetops. "This... this isnae right, Angus..."

The horse ground to a halt a short distance before one of their most frequented clearings, a normally beautiful patch by the river, one that was covered in wild heather and had apple trees nearby. Under any other circumstances, Angus would have headed straight for it, but he knew better. Angus knew that Merida would go striding in there without thinking about the danger, and even though he knew when she needed to get away, his first priority was keeping her safe. With a whinny, Angus started to turn around. "Och, ye big bairn," Merida sighed, jumping from her best friend's back and guiding him to safety at the very edge of the clearing. "I'm gonnæ go see what's up. You stay here, I'll be right back."

With yet another arrow on her bow - she wasn't stupid enough to go in unarmed - she took a big breath and stepped out from the shadows, immediately wishing that she hadn't.

The beast bellowed instantly and the sound went straight to her heart, all the air rushing from her lungs to leave her gasping, her body wracked in horror. Everything seemed to stop, especially Merida's ability to speak or scream, her words jammed in her throat like a gammy cake. She was rooted to the spot like a tree, as still as if she could have been standing there for centuries. Great black beasts were no stranger to her, given her history, but not like this. No, the emerald eyes that were now locked on her with unflinching fury did not belong to a bear. Not even close.

They belonged to a dragon.

Merida scanned the beast frantically from her spot, desperately trying to convince her self that seeing wasn't believing, that the scales that danced in the moonlight and teased her so were not scales

at all, that they were some trick of her muddled mind. But no. It wasn't a fairytale or folklore, nor was it an illusion - it was very, very real, and very, very angry. She started backing up slowly, quickening her unsure step as she got ever closer to the safety of the forest she knew so well, leaping behind the tree where Angus stood at the first opportunity. Chest heaving and fear coursing through her body like an electrical charge, she dared to peek out from behind her tree, Angus doing the very same. Instantly, he whinnied in dismay, stomping the ground with his feet and rearing up behind her. But Merida was transfixed.

It was trapped, entangled in a net of loose branches, one wing stretched to full span but stuck under a boulder by the water. Though it couldn't move, it's reflexes were still sharp - the dragon caught her gaze and let out a mighty bellow, one that could shake the leaves off the trees. Not the time, or the place, but her quick mind declared that it's loud cry was only so much quieter - but a lot more pleasant than - her father's singing. Merida shook the thought away and dived behind the tree once again, a grim realisation coming to mind: she had done this. What seemed like just moments before she had brought down this majestic creature with her arrow, her misdirected spite. Her carelessness had toppled a creature of myth and wonder. King Fergus would have dealt it a 'mercy blow' and hoisted it upon his broad shoulders, brought it to the castle to exhibition in front of the villagers and the clans from beyond, a trophy better than that of Mor'du. But Merida didn't feel proud, and she certainly did not want it to die - tears welled in her eyes, guilt boiling in the pit of her stomach for the second time that night.

Terrified but wanting to help, she stepped out from behind the tree, staring at the beast. It growled once more, and Merida took a deep, slow gulp of breath, letting the air flow into her lungs. Maybe it would have been fun, she thought as she took even steps towards the dragon, to take it's body back; to see the look on her mother's face as she deposited it on the stone floor of the throne room. But no. Her feet forced her forward, her nerves burning and tense, instinct screaming for her to run. "Ah'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice choked and hoarse, watching it watching her as she approached the boulder that held it down. Merida circled the stone, examining it's position, but when she felt blindly confident enough to give it a shove, the beast growled in pain. "Ah know, Ah know! It's gonnae hurt, and... ye're probably gonnae kill me at the first chance, but..."

Persistent, Merida gave the boulder another almighty push, and the dragon growled once more. "Och, will ye shut it jus' now? I'm trynna he-"

"Toothless?"

Merida froze. Someone was approaching, clambering through the forest so loudly she could hear the twigs break under their feet. They were close, too - looking for something called a _Toothless? - _but getting far, far too close to the dragon. She spun her head in the direction of the movement, and through the fog appeared the silhouette of a person. The dragon made a groaning noise, and there came the voice again - "Toothless?" She grunted, partly from the exertion of trying to back the boulder of the dragon's wing, partly because she knew that it was her royal duty to protect the stranger first.

"Go away! Uh... it's no safe!" Merida cursed under her breath, for the first time wishing that she had her mother's way with words.

"Toothless!" The stranger replied with more urgency, the voice coming ever closer to the clearing. Merida's heart was pounding, but her eyes rolled - despite her warning, the person kept advancing, calling out that odd name. The dragon, however, perked it's head up, letting out a weak, guttural groan. With a jolt, Merida realized that the dragon was replying to the person - but it was too late. "Get away from him!" The other voice screamed, and before she could react, she and the person were sent tumbling into the water of the creek - a boy, it seemed - had launched himself at her.

2. Chapter 2

Plunged into the icy winter waters of the creek, the brawling boy and girl became nothing more than a tangle of limbs, his hands reaching out in a blind attack, hers pushing to keep him at bay. On the shore, the boy's dragon watched and waited for them in horror, Merida's horse Angus paced back and forth until the pair's buoyancy bounced them back to the water's surface and with a great gasp and let them up to breathe. As soon as Angus saw her mass of curly red hair, he leaped into the water and grabbed the back of the boy's fur vest in his teeth, dragging him away from his Princess. The dragon roared, unhappy that the horse had dared to leave his own companion in such a heap on the grass. Merida was still in the water, coughing up the mass that had entered her lungs. Angus entered the water again to help her, and she grabbed onto his thick black neck in gratitude.

Once back on dry land, the horse nudged her gently, repeatedly, with the anxiousness of a parent trying to assure that their child was safe. She smiled begrudgingly and patted his fur. "I'm okay, Angus, I'm okay."

"But you won't be!" The boy threatened. He was still in a heap on the ground, gradually trying to sort himself out - the cold water had knocked the force right out of him. Merida smirked. How could she take the threat of someone who looked so ridiculous? "Aye, if you say so laddie," she retorted, watching him in amusement as, finally, he stood up and dusted himself off.

By her observation, he was nothing special. Brown hair, green eyes, decent looking, a rather skinny little example that, given the opportunity, Merida could break like a twig. He was dressed rather oddly, too. No tartan draped around his body to declare his clan, no studs, no rivets, not a sporran in sight, just a simple green shirt sort of thing. At least the fur was kind of normal. "Yer no from around here, are yeh?"

"No, I am not. What gave it away, was it this," he paused, to make a flailing gesture at himself - "or the dragon?"

"Actually, it was yer shirt. And yer hair. And yer accent. And the fact that if yeh were from around here, you wouldnae have tackled yer princess."

The boy froze. "P-Princess?"

"Aye, good tae know yer ears are workin'."

He puffed out his chest. "Well, well, I... I-I am son of the chief where I come from, so-"

"Also good tae know. Means nothin' in mah' fathers' kingdom, though."

"No, I didn't think it would..." The boy replied, shying away from her gaze. He rubbed the back of his neck anxiously, looking towards the dragon who sat warily keeping his eye on the situation.

"So," Merida said, meeting the dragon's eye, "this yer pet?"

"Yeah... No! Yes! No! Yes! Sort of! Pet?"

"Aye. Pretty cute wee guy."

"Uh... thanks, I mean, we just met..."

"Not you, eedjit. Yer dragon!"

"Oh. Oh yeah, of course!"

"So, is this yer pet or no? Ah mean, ah never met a person wi' a dragon for a pet before."

"You'd be surprised."

"Yer tellin' me there's more o' ye?"

"Yeah. No! No-no, no-no-no-no-no. No more people with dragons, aheh. No. Just me. Yep. Just me."

Merida looked at the boy warily, a smile creeping on her face. The idea that, somewhere, there were more dragons just like this ignited a spark in her imagination: she, of course, knew magic was real, so why couldn't there be a whole kingdomful of dragons? Dragons that weren't the vicious killers of their folklore, but that were like family? Like Angus?

He spoke again before she did. "Anyway, so, since you're the only one around, I'm guessing you're the one responsible for shooting Toothless?"

"Aye... I'm afraid so. Ah mean, if ah knew it wis a dragon, ah widnae o' shot at it. T' be honest, if ah had known, ah woulda had to go alert mah dad and, that would o' awoken the bear king's desire for a gud fight, so consider yerselves lucky."

The boy gawped at her, gangly arms dangling limply by his side. "Is that it? Are you not... I dunno, _apologize?"_

"I wis tryin' tae help the poor beast! And then someone attacked me, so... nah, ah dinnae think so." Merida grinned, but her smile quickly faded as she looked over the dragon - _Toothless - _and saw, again, how his wing was trapped. But this time, she noticed something that

she hadn't before - a tail wing, quite clearly artificial, bright red, decorated with a white skull and a gaping tear in the fabric, the mark of her arrow. The boy caught her looking at it and though angry at her, blushed. She was right, of course. He did attack her. Not something that he'd really done before, but she had threatened his dragon, so what other choice did he have?

She turned back to face him, and for the first time, he saw her clearly. Merida hadn't thought much of him, but she was unlike anyone he'd ever seen - back on Berk, where he came from, he'd never seen a girl with such incredible, wild hair, especially in that colour. When she moved, it twisted and twirled around her shoulders like live fire. It caught him short for a moment - it had been a while since the boy had been so stunned by a girl, and if he was honest, he didn't trust it. The last girl who had that effect on him turned out to be nothing but romantic trouble, even if she was still a close friend.

"Whit are ye gawpin' at, eh?" Merida asked, putting her fist on her hip. Potential suitors had come and gone, only ever really being interested in one, and even then Young MacGuffin had never looked at her like that. It made her feel uncomfortable. "Let's... let's free yer wee pet, alright?"

The boy nodded silently, and she rolled her eyes. "Ah'm Merida."

"Shouldn't I call you... Princess?"

"Aye, ye probably should, if yeh wanted to follow 'protocol'. But considerin' ah'm the one who shot yeh out of the sky, ah'm figurin' we're past formalities, eh?"

The boy laughed and it was genuine. Merida smiled, happy that she had made him laugh, but happier at Toothless' visible relaxation. The boy was comfortable, and now, so was his dragon.

"Whit's yer name?"

"Hiccup. I know, it's kind of... stupid, but where I come from -"

"Say no more. Ah like it. Kinda suits yeh... so, 'Hiccup', how do yeh think we can free yer pet?"

With that, the teenagers launched into a hearty debate over the best way to free Toothless with minimal pain: they tried all sorts of methods, but always with Merida doing the work and Hiccup keeping the dragon calm. As she wedged a large branch under the boulder, hoping to get some sort of leverage, she stopped to observe the mismatched pair. It was sort of sweet, him looking into the dragon's eyes, carefully patting its scales and telling it everything was going to be alright, but so far, there hadn't been much success. The boulder had only moved a few inches. With all the strength she could muster, Merida gave the branch an almighty shove and for a moment, it looked like she'd done it - but no, again, it had only moved a few inches.

"Aw hell!" She exclaimed, drawing the attention of both pets and her new, odd acquaintance. Angus whinnied, forever concerned, he

carefully trotted around Toothless' large body and came to a stop at her side. He nudged her with his muzzle, and suddenly, it hit her. "Angus!" She exclaimed.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked.

"Angus," Merida said. She turned to face the horse, guiding him to the boulder's side. "If ye kick this bloody pebble away, I'll get yeh all the oats and apples ye could ever want! How does that sound boy, eh? Just help me free the dra... Toothless, and there's nothin' but the best food from here on out!" Angus whinnied again, sounding entirely underwhelmed with her proposition, but this time used his muzzle to nudge her out of the way. She grinned widely, shooting a thumbs-up at a both anxious and impressed looking Hiccup.

The horse initially faced the boulder, echoing Merida by circling it and observing it, before turning it's back to the stone. Strong hind legs hefted high, he struck it with all his might, and, just like that, the boulder moved further in that one strike than she had made it in dozens of attempts. Toothless growled lowly, but there was nothing he could do until he was free; in the wake of her idea, Merida felt emboldened and took a seat at the dragon's side - close to it, but with a considerable distance from the boy. Hiccup felt a weird feeling in his gut, watching the flame-haired stranger approaching his pet without any trepidation. He lost his left leg trying to convince his own people that the dragons meant no harm, and here she was, completely unfazed by his pet now. In fact, it wasn't so much that she was so blase in approaching, it was the fact she had deliberately chose a spot away from his own. As he watched her gently raise her hand, not touching Toothless, Hiccup realized that, he wasn't a part of this dialogue. This was Merida and Toothless, and no-one else.

She kept her eyes locked on the dragon, but her head was bowed; she was asking for his permission to touch him, to lay a hand upon his scales. For a brief moment, Toothless' eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, untrusting of the one who had downed him and trapped him so unkindly, but he saw the apology in her eyes, and gently, closed his eyes as if to say yes - Hiccup seemed to trust her, and Toothless knew from experience to just go with it. Merida bit her lip, suppressing the eager grin of someone experiencing something new, and gently pressed her hand against his chest. She closed her eyes, just feeling the rise and fall of his strained breaths, completely in awe.

"I'm so sorry, Toothless."

The dragon huffed in response.

"Thank you."

She stood up abruptly, quickly striding around to her horse's side, picking up the branch from his feet. "Well, no point in jus' sittin' here. Move it, Angus. Sooner he's free, the better."

Hiccup watched, dumbfounded, as Angus kicked and Merida tried to free the last part of the trapped wing. All he could do was catch the dragon's great emerald eye and gesture wildly, feeling an awe of entirely different kind. What a strange stranger. Toothless made a

guttural sound to imitate laughing, baring the toothless mouth for which he was named, but his expression changed as quickly as Merida had stood - the pressure on his delicate frame had lifted, and he was finally free.

3. Chapter 3

Toothless free and worry gone, Hiccup could sit back and relax. He rested against a tree and looked over the messy clearing in which his dragon had landed: the destruction was clear, but the area was beautiful, heightened by the dawn bringing it's salmon pink and orange sky. It wasn't quite nighttime, but it wasn't quite morning; there were patches of wild heather growing just about everywhere; moss grew on just about everything, and the waters of the creek danced in the oncoming day. He smiled, watching as Toothless bounded straight for it, plunged his head into the water and brought it back out almost instantly, fish fluttering out it's last breaths in his proud jaw. The injured wing hung at an unnatural angle and he'd need time to heal, but for now, he was quite comfortable catching his breakfast.

From across the way, Hiccup watched as Merida stood from her own comfortable spot and approached the water, grinning as she went. She notched an arrow on her bow, and both Hiccup and Toothless jolted into action; he ran to protect the dragon, the dragon growled in warning. Merida didn't notice though, she was too happy to care - she just took aim at the river and let her arrow fly, producing a salmon just a few seconds later. Boy and pet exchanged a glance. They hadn't been expecting that, but she waved the impaled fish at Hiccup. "Fancy some breakfast, stranger?"

"Uh... raw? Let me tell you, raw fish: not so nice! I had t-"

"Och, shut it," Merida replied, rolling her eyes. "Ah'll get the fire, you can decide whether yer hungry or not."

She gathered some branches and quickly assembled a makeshift spit on a dry patch of grass; a lot of the area was covered in snow but much of the clearing was bare, only a few areas of dragon-shaped snowbanks were clinging to life on the edges. Still, it was damp, but she was hungry. After all, not so long ago she had shot at what she thought was a bird in the sky, expecting to replace the almost-dinner of the argument-filled evening. She used stones to create a circle around her spit and set a fire within it, instantly mellowed by the radiating warmth. Fish now positioned and cooking, she took to the shore again, quickly gathering another four salmon with her arrows. Merida never missed.

Hiccup stared, rubbing both arms at the same time, not quite sure of how to act around the arrow-slinging princess. But like her, he was hungry - and eager to make a good 'first' impression, he supposed, having never been in the company of 'other royalty'. With a resigned sigh, he approached the edge of the water, quickly deciding that he'd catch his own fish and prove his own fish-catching capability. With his own bare hands. He didn't succeed, though, and on the first dip of his hands, the shock of coldness made him lose his balance and fall into the water. Merida couldn't contain her laughter as he flailed about, and was laughing as, still wet from the earlier attack, she pulled him free of the creek's icy grip. "Uh..." He

sputtered, utterly devastated at his mistake. Just to prove a point, Merida reached down into the water and closed her eyes, concentrating until a salmon swam right into her reach. "Gotcha."

"Oh, come on! How did you do that?!"

"Ah didnae go pokin' in blindly - ah've had years o' practice, and you... well, yeh dinnae look like a keen fisherman." She strode past him to the fire, taking a seat and pulling the now-cooked first fish from it's place on the spit. She skewered the other five on an arrow and placed them above the fire, gesturing for Hiccup to come take a seat. He walked over begrudgingly, the water still dripping from his clothes and straight into the fire. Both Merida's and Hiccups expressions flattened.

"Yer kiddin' me, right?" She said.

Toothless made his throaty laugh and barked out a fireball, making a fire big enough to warm all four of them; Angus laid down by Merida's side and she patted him appreciatively, Toothless coming to sit near Hiccup; the boy shot his friend an awkward but grateful grin, both considering that his victory and knowing that Toothless would make him pay for it later. "Yeah, but I have a pet dragon," he said to her, trying hard to appear nonchalant.

"Aye, very good," She replied, unimpressed with Hiccup's apparent bravado, thoroughly impressed with with Toothless' fire. "Y'hungry or not? Because I'm no gonnae eat all o' these myself."

"...why did you catch them all, then?"

"Six. Three each," Merida replied, sounding very matter-of-fact.

Hiccup felt odd. This girl, this princess, who had caused both his dragon and himself injury, had not only won Toothless' approval easily but had thought to get him some fish when she didn't know if he was hungry or not. It was very considerate, he thought, trying to ignore the stirred feeling in his stomach that was something between pride and nausea. He sat down dutifully, watching as the flame-haired girl took a large, sloppy bite out of her skewered fish.

"They'll be done in a minute," she added, speaking through her mouthful.

"Thank you... you know, for, catching me some, and whatever..."

Merida flashed him a sly grin. "Well, yeh look like yeh need a decent meal."

"Well now, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Yeh know exactly whit it's supposed to mean. Ah've seen twigs that look stronger than you."

"Oh that's kind, so, are you just gonna, sit there and insult me after you shot my hard work, which was attached to my pet?" He snorted. "Not very welcoming!"

Merida looked up from the fire. "So you made that bright red wing-thing? I thought so."

Hiccup choked on his breath. "Well, see now, thing about that is..."

"Fish now, life story later okay?" Merida replied, taking the five cooked salmon from the spit; she slid two from the arrow and stuck them on a different arrow, offering the one with three to Hiccup, who took it without thinking and stared at it, unsure. The girl just shrugged her shoulders and finished the first fish, barely catching a breath before moving on to another. "Mmph," she murmured, satisfied.

"That good, huh?" Hiccup muttered under-his breath, twisting the arrow back and forth between his fingers, reluctant to take a bite.

"Remind me never to cook for you again."

Hiccup's eyes shot up to meet hers, and thankfully, he could see the amusement in them. Bright blue, reflecting the fire's sparks, but had sparkles all their own; Merida's eyes were almost hypnotic. He gulped and looked down to his breakfast, gingerly nibbling the browned scales. She watched as his face changed from reluctant to satisfied, and soon, they just ate their food in silence. Not an uncomfortable silence, at least not from where Merida was sitting; she was more than content to eat and watch the sky fade through it's procession of morning colours, finally coming to a pleasant blue. She leaned back on her hands and closed her eyes, basking in the warm winter sunlight.

They sat like that in a pocket of time that didn't seem to matter, it could have been minutes or hours until Angus broke the peace. He let out a frustrated neigh, and Merida jumped to attention instantly. It was an alarm, a warning, something she'd heard several times before and by now, knew exactly what it meant.

"Aw hell, I gotta get home!"

4. Chapter 4

Without a minute to lose, Merida was hurriedly moving around the make-shift camp, gathering her arrows and thoroughly frustrated. Hiccup and Toothless could only watch as she whirled back and forth, soon becoming nothing more than a blur of red curls and blue wool; she had the clearing tidied of all traces that she, or a dragon, had ever been there, and it became plain that she was hiding from something. Every so often she'd curse under her breath, saying things like 'no puddin' for a year' and 'she's gonnae kill me!'

"Running away from something?" Hiccup asked quietly, pulling the remains of breakfast off her arrow, taking it to the water's edge and gently dipping it in the creek until the fish-stains washed away.

Merida span around quickly, coming to face him, breathless and wide-eyed. She hadn't looked this scared when confronted by a dragon, and when her lips twisted into a frown, it made Hiccup's gut clench.

She was not built for sadness, he thought. Not someone who looked as utterly _wild_ as she did. She nodded, all her jibes and wit gone.
"Wanna talk about it?"

The words burst from her mouth like a waterfall. "Ah fought with mah mum last night and she used the bear thing against me and it's no like I dinnae care for mah kingdom or whatever it's just _ah like mah freedom_ and why has she always gotta bring it up? Ah mean I thought we were better now, that she understood! Well no, that's no fair, she does get it, she just doesnae mind _hittin' below the belt'_ every now and again; for all her so-called _manners_ and _dignity_ she sure can fight dirty, except she doesnae use a weapon she uses _yer mistakes_ against yeh and that's no fair. I'd rather use mah bow any day o' the week than hurt someone like that, but ah know, ah hurt her first, and-"

Hiccup was instantly struck by how she was running away from her own mother. "Parental troubles?" He interjected.

"AYE! Who decided to make her Que- oh, aye, right... but she's no the Queen o' _mah life,_ y'know? I'm _never_ gonnae be like her!"

"Me too." Hiccup said, quieter than before, and Merida stopped fretting instantly. "What?"

Hiccup twirled the arrow in his fingers, looking into the water. He didn't notice when her reflection joined his, he was too busy thinking about his own reasons for running.

"My father gave me the whole 'you're gonna be chief' thing again last night. Is it not enough for him that I revolutionized _our whole way of life?_ I just... sometimes, he expects too much of me. Honestly, do I look like the sort to lead a bunch of bloodthirsty, pillaging _Vikings?_"

"Last night? Dragon? _Viking...?_" Merida whispered, mainly for her own benefit. "OH!" She exclaimed. "You must be from Berk!"

"You've heard of it?"

"Oh _aye, _ah've heard of it. When ah was a bairn, yer people tried to take our land. 'Expansion', they called it. O' course, mah dad, and the lords, werenae havin' that, so we drove yer people back to their beast-infested hive. Didnae know it was dragons, though..."

"Yeah well, I kind of... domesticated the dragons, and now we live in harmony or... y'know, but he expects that I'm gonna be chief someday, and it's not like I haven't thought about it, I think about it _all the time!_"

"I know!" Merida gasped. "It's no like ah dinnae wanna be Queen mahself one day, and ah will be, it's just for now, it seems-"

"I'm just not ready," they said in unison, coming to face each other. "So you... you understand," Hiccup said. He'd obviously never met someone in exactly the same predicament as he was.

"Aye... I best be gettin' back. My mother... well, she's a real _bear," _Merida replied darkly. She'd said bear before, he'd noticed,

but decided not to ask. Instead, he blurted something that sounded entirely less noble.

"I don't want to go back."

She considered him for a moment, looking him up and down. Last night, she'd made the decision that he didn't look like much, especially not a viking, but in the morning's light she could see him better: Hiccup did look like he needed a good meal, but that was okay, he didn't look like the sort to big big and beefy. Really, he was fine just the way he was, _cute,_ even; what with his long brown hair and eyes the color of the glen in spring, right down to the smattering of barely-there freckles across his cheeks. Definitely nothing like the lords' sons, or even the villagers. No, he looked like nothing she'd ever seen before, and the big dragon waiting patiently by his side confirmed it. Merida knew that she couldn't send Hiccup away. The real problem was how to hide Toothless. Dragons were all well and good if you were a viking, but in DunBroch, people were a lot more fragile.

"Yeh can come to the castle..." She said carefully, weighing the words on her tongue. Hiccup broken into a wide grin. "Oh, that's a relief! Thank you so mu-"

"You're gonna have to hide though. Both him, and you. If mah mother saw me bring a _boy_ to the castle, she'd go crazy!"

"Why?"

"I'll tell yeh later. But for now, let's get going. Like ah said, she's likely to kill me."

They both looked up from the water to meet each other's eyes, sharing a look of grim understanding, before going to sit atop their respective pets. Merida mounted Angus swiftly, watching as her new friend sat on the harness on the dragon's back. "He gonna be okay?" She asked softly, apologetic. Toothless' wing was obviously fractured - even if she had sent Hiccup away, he couldn't have left. It was going to take quite a while for the wing to heal.

"Yeah. He's strong. Dragons get their wings bent all the time back on Berk, just usually I can strap the injury to their bodies until it gets better."

"Don't worry. I'll find you some materials. Kind of owe it to you, anyway."

Both Toothless and Hiccup smiled up at her, and she nodded. "Aye, well, time to go. Just follow me and... raceyehtheedgeoftheforest!"

And with that, Angus tore off into the trees, Merida yelling in joy as they went. Hiccup and Toothless bounded after her - the dragon tilting his head up take a sly glance at his rider, who looked utterly bemused. The dragon made his guttural laugh, and soon the only thing they could see of their fast friends was the distinctive blur of Merida's hair flying through the forest, their speed making it look like a trail of fire blazing through every branch. Winter had left the trees bare, and soon the castle came into view, send both pairs skidding to a halt.

Hiccup was awestruck. His house wasn't nearly as grand as hers. Castle Dunbroch was breathtaking, it's grey stone and massive height towering over the tree tops; a long, winding path from the forest, over the bridge, led through an arch and up to a village teeming with people selling their wares or singing with joy. Best of all, though, was the view. From the cliff, the view spanned for miles, a seemingly endless expanse of green hills and glittering grey-blue sea, the kind of place where - had there been no-one around - Hiccup and Toothless would have flew for hours, just taking in the sight of it. It was so unlike Berk. In Berk, there were forests and vast expanses, yes, and they were as beautiful, but the people were so packed together; their villages were labyrinthine. It felt wild here, uninhabited, and looking to Merida, he could see that she was just the same, she was just as free. The serene smile on her face said it all: she was awestruck, too. From the famous Fire Falls, to the wonderful people, she had never gotten used to the beauty of the land.

"Wow," He breathed.

"Yeah," She replied.

They shared a glance, before Merida's eyes drifted to Toothless. She sighed.

"I have just no idea where to hide you."

5. Chapter 5

Far below the bridge crossing to DunBroch castle, there was an almost hidden gate that led under the castle and through to a well up at the fronts doors. Merida had used it before to sneak someone into the castle, but wasn't sure that it'd work a second time: once in the castle, what would she do with Toothless? She couldn't very well send him to the stable with Angus, or march him through the front door - she scanned the castle's perimeter, trying hard to make a mental blue-print of every room and every hall way, but it was too difficult to visualize, even for someone who knew the routes better than anyone. The castle wasn't even simple enough in shape, and truthfully, Merida wasn't sure if she'd ever actually seen all of the castle. She sighed, eyes drifting towards the sky when she saw it. The Tower. Not just any tower, her tower. The only one without watchmen, the one only she knew how to get to. A devilish smirk spread across her lips. As a bairn, during a friendly game of hide-and-seek with Maudie, she'd run all around the castle until she spotted a small, human-sized crack behind a wall, the kind you'd only find if you were specifically looking for such a place. She slipped in behind it and there it was: a long, winding, dusty corridor; a heavy wooden door leading to even dustier steps, and finally, out onto the roof. To her young heart, the tower was a blessing, the perfect hiding spot. To Maudie, it was a cause for great distress, when two hours after first starting the game, she had to tearfully admit to the King that she'd lost the Princess. (Merida hurriedly emerged from her new spot when she heard her father's bellow.)

"How's yer beast fer climbin', Hiccup?"

"What?"

"See that tower?" Merida pointed to the west side, the only lookout point without anyone actually looking out. "Nobody knows how to get there but me. If Toothless can climb it, ah can sneak yeh through the house teh go see him."

Ignoring the way his heart quickened at the invitation to go in to her 'house', Hiccup considered it. "But... I need to be able to fix his wing. Both of them."

"Och, that's no problem. Yeh need metal, yeh go to mah father's private metalworks down the cellar. It's usually used for making weapons but since we dinnae need any right now, no-one's ever down there. Yeh'll be free to work, and since it's far below, no-one will hear yeh."

"And if I need to measure him?"

"Ah'll sneak him down there, nae bother. Thing about this place is, if yeh dinnae have yer wits about yeh, yeh'll get lost. But to keep him nearby, it's the tower or nothin'."

"Well, what do you say, Toothless?"

The dragon paused, remembering the last time he'd tried to climb rocks. It hadn't gone so well. He grunted once, before making his mind up: his climbing skills had improved greatly, and if there was a decent claw-hold, he'd get up there. Toothless nodded.

"Right, well then, if we're gonna get him up there, we're gonnae have to cross the bridge and go around the side perimeter. From there, he'll climb up, then I'll see about you. It's a good thing there's no people around. You go first, I'll keep watch."

"Wait, what? You expect me just to go waltzing my dragon across this bridge, in daylight, through snow, in full view of the castle?"

Merida shrugged. "Nae other way teh do it."

Hiccup stared at her. "You're serious."

"Get on with it."

He sighed and carefully patted the dragon's side, unable to contain the sick feeling in his stomach. "Let's go, Bud."

There was a reason night furies, like Toothless, were once so feared on the island of Berk: they were stealthy creatures, sly, cunning. Toothless' footsteps lived up to that legend as he carefully, silently, made his way through the snow on the bridge, making it to the other side and blending into the castle's shadow easily as they pressed against the wall. When Merida was convinced of their safety, she made her way across the bridge, too, slowly, Angus being careful to step in and erase the dragon's footprints. She was almost there when she saw something that made her heart stop. "Oh, no..."

"Merida!" Her mother cried, appearing from the archway up the path. "There you are! Oh darling, I've been so worried-" Queen Elinor

picked up the hem of her gown, a move she would never have considered before 'the incident', and ran down to meet Merida at the foot of the path, completely oblivious to the boy and the dragon hidden just feet away.

"Mum! What-what are you..."

"Thank the lord you're safe. The boys-they've, they've been so worried. And so have I. Oh, darling. I hate it when you go tearing off into the woods like that - I never know where you're going, or who you'll find, or, if you'll follow a trail of wisps and... leave forever..." Her mother's voice trailed away, far away, so much so that the glazed, saddened look in Elinor's eye frightened Merida. She hopped down from Angus and hastily hugged her mother close, and they stood like that for several minutes, Merida for once grateful of the mothering.

When she pulled away, Queen Elinor wiped a solitary tear from her eye. "Oh, mercy." Merida watched as the Queen straightened herself out, regaining her momentarily-forgotten composure, even though she liked her mother a lot better when she was more... loose. Like her hair was, now. She hadn't braided it in a long time. "Well, just in time for breakfast, as usual."

"Mum..." Merida groaned.

"Oh, you didn't already eat, did you?" Elinor replied, giving her daughter a knowing glance, and for a moment, Merida could see the twinkle in her eye, that spark of amusement they could now share. Of course, she was referring to when it wasn't Hiccup she had to cook fish for.

"Hiccup!" Merida blurted. The Queen's expression changed, becoming quizzical. Merida mentally kicked herself, not daring to look towards the shadows, where she would have seen her viking friend peeking from behind the great onyx body of his dragon.

"Excuse me, dear?"

"Hiccups! Hiccups, I've had the hiccups all morning. Nope, couldnae eat a thing. They're gone now though, that's why I came back, time to eat. Haha. Let's go." The embarrassed young Princess gave the Queen an insistent nudge back up the path, and finally looked over to the forest once her mother's back was turned. Hiccup looked shocked, perhaps a little bit angry, but all Merida could do was narrow her eyes and shrug, hoping he'd get the message. Wait, she implored silently. Just wait.

6. Chapter 6

****Author's Note: ****Hey guys, I just wanted to say I really appreciate your reviews, favourites and otherwise - thank you for such a nice reception so far, and I hope you continue to enjoy the story as much as I'm enjoying writing it! (Nice to see you, Mericcup fans. :3)

* * *

><p>"Well, that's just great." Hiccup said to Toothless, left behind in the shadow outside the castle walls. She was gone, and with her

went the spark of hope he'd felt knowing that he didn't have to return to Berk just yet. He couldn't now, of course, what with Toothless being injured, but still; what were they supposed to do? Just wait? It could take any length of time for his flame-haired friend to return, and when she did, would she find them easily? Would the plan work? No, there were just too many variables. Frustrated, Hiccup walked further around the side - close enough to see the winding path, far enough away to be hidden from unwanted eyes - and took a seat up against a barren birch tree, Toothless dutifully following. The dragon put his head in the boy's lap, sticking his tongue out dejectedly. All they could do was wait.<p>

Eventually, Hiccup fell into an uneasy sleep, unable to keep himself awake for realizing that he hadn't slept in about a day. The dream that greeted him was one he'd had several times before: back on Berk, he was standing in the old battle arena, looking up at the whole island of people gathered around to watch. Stoick the Vast, great leader of Berk strode down from his outside throne, coming to a stop at the chain's that formed the arena's 'roof', next to the village's oracle. He takes one disappointed look at Hiccup. "Will my son ever be a Viking?" He asks. The Oracle shakes her head no. The crowd do what they always do, booing and jeering at him, throwing things at him until he finally grabs a shield and deflects whatever it is they're throwing. At this point in the dream, he usually sees a blur in the crowd, a streak of blond hair moving quickly down to the arena gate. But this time, it's different. The girl that usually becomes the blur stands silently next to his father, holding the hand of some unknown male. Dream-Hiccup's heart pounds. This isn't right. Suddenly, he sees the a different blur. A whirlwind of red curls weaves in and out of the villagers, running circles around the arena until the chains catch fire. The blur stops. The last thing he sees is bright blue eyes.

"Come on, move it," Hiccup heard someone say as he - and Toothless - were shaken back to consciousness. A face swam into vision. Merida. With his senses slowly awakening, he became acutely aware of the trail of dribble running down his chin and he woke up instantly embarrassed, wiping the drool on his sleeve. "Uh..."

"Well, ah guess that counts as awake." Merida said, stooped over his slumped form. She swept one stray curl from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "Welcome back."

"Time... for the plan?" Hiccup yawns.

"Yep. 'Fraid so, sleepy-head... and sleepy head." Merida added, giving Toothless a friendly pat on the head.

It was a great effort for Hiccup to wake up - he hadn't slept well in days - but he did, however reluctantly, and the trio set off towards the west side of the castle. It wasn't that long before they reached Merida's tower and they stopped in front of it silently, neither one overly eager to begin the plan. Toothless stared up at it, assessing the situation: yes, he could climb it. There was a few crumbling rocks here and there in which he could dig his claws, so he didn't bother waiting; with a grateful snout-nudge into both the legs of Hiccup and Merida, the dragon stalked towards the tower and made his first leap. The teenagers gathered their breath, watching as Toothless' claws skittered back down the tower until, finally, they could breathe again, the dragon had caught himself. First claw-hold

complete, it was relatively simple for hi to make his way to the top and the teenagers were left thanking the fates as they watched his long, black tail disappear onto the roof. Toothless was safe.

And they were, for the first time, completely alone.

Merida grinned, thoroughly convinced of the dragon's safety, and turned back into the forest with a victory march. Hiccup couldn't believe it was that easy but followed her anyway, though he wasn't quite as confident. They strode down the hill back towards the main entrance in near-silence, Merida moving quietly with the nimble footsteps of someone who was practically one with the terrain. Hiccup's footsteps were less stable, every now and then stumbling over a twig or flinching whenever a bird fluttered somewhere high above. Sneaking was never a good thing, he had decided. Even if it went well now, there'd be consequences somewhere down the line.

"Um..." He muttered, trying to think of some sort of small talk to break the discomfort he was feeling, but they had arrived back at the edge of the shadow overlooking the bridge and path leading up to the castle - villagers were moving around freely now, talking animatedly about their village gossip, dogs ran free and it was like the whole place had suddenly come to life. Hiccup's breath caught in his throat and the pair stopped walking, just out of sight. They were going to get caught for sure.

"This way," Merida declared quickly, pointing down towards a hidden slope on the cliff leading down beneath the bridge.

"Why?" Hiccup asked, confused.

"Well, yer bound teh draw attention goin' up there, dressed like yeh are; luckily, there's a little shortcut mah mother showed me. Come on,"

For someone who had ridden a dragon, Hiccup definitely didn't like the cliff, but followed as instructed, slipping down the rocky path with great uncertainty, and again, Merida seemed completely unfazed. It was almost annoying that she could stride down easily, where he was left dragging his hands along the cliff wall for dear life, but they reached the bottom far below the bridge in no time.

"Here we go," Merida said excitedly as she approached a gate in the wall. "Again, no-one ever uses this place. Just... yeh know, follow me. It's a fair walk through the tunnel."

"...Is it dark?"

"Aye, but ah know where ah'm goin'. Don't yeh trust me?"

"Should I trust you, person-I-only-met-a-couple-of-hours-ago-because-you-knocked-me-and-my-dragon-out-of-the-sky?"

Merida frowned, turning to face him. She looked him up and down, and for the first time, noticed that one of his legs was nothing more than a metal bracket and a substitute foot. She gasped.

"Not the first time you've had an accident on a dragon...?" She asked

quietly.

Hiccup frowned. "Oh. Yeah."

"Why didn't yeh point that out?! I coulda come up with somethin' less _painful!"_

_ "It's not painful, just... inconvenient."

She sighed. "Sorry I didnae see it."

"Nah, it's okay. It was kinda nice that you didn't see it. Makes me feel less... freaky."

"You're no freaky." She said carefully, before smiling as she opened the gate. "Well, aye, yeh are, but no because o' that. Honestly, it's no like ah've no seen a one legged guy before."

They entered the tunnel, making sure that the gate was closed tight behind them. It was a long, winding walk through the dark tunnel, but Merida knew the route; all she had to do was trail her hand along the tunnel-cave wall and they'd be there in no time.

"It's not?" Hiccup asked as they set off.

"Hell, mah dad's only got one leg himsel'! No big deal." Merida replied, striding confidently in the darkness, so much so that she'd accidentally left him behind. Hiccup gulped. He didn't like the tunnel. Again, for someone who had ridden a dragon, it wasn't easy for him being in a relatively small, dark space when he was so used to soaring through open sky, especially when his guide was several steps ahead. "Uhh... Merida?" He asked, stumbling forward, metal foot squealing uncomfortably in it's socket, but he found himself grateful of having a new name to say and hoped he'd learn several more if he could. Or if he got out of the cave. He stumbled forward again, grateful of not crashing into a cave wall, but called her name once more.

Hearing the unnatural grind of his metal foot, Merida cursed under her breath; how could she be so inconsiderate to her guest? Queen Elinor would not have been pleased if she had known, certainly less so if she knew her daughter was sneaking a viking boy into her castle. "Hiccup?" Merida asked, walking backwards to follow the sound and trailing her hand back along the wall. When she was sure that he was close by, she stuck her hand out, a thrill of terror shooting throughout her body as she grabbed a fistful of fur vest and thought that it was some sort of wild animal, until she remembered. Hiccup's shoulders sagged, obviously grateful that his guide was back.

Merida apologized, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"It's okay, just... let's get out of here."

7. Chapter 7

****Author's Note: ****I hope you don't mind my use of an original background character, though I don't suppose it matters...? Anyway, if you cared to review, that'd be just great, and again, thank you for reading!

* * *

><p>As the stream of sunlight coming from the well at the tunnel's end grew ever brighter, so did the kids become ever quicker, eagerness to get up to the castle growing with every step. There were, in fact, odd stairs leading up into the disused well; a possible escape route carved into the very earth by the kings and queens who came before Merida's own family. It was easy then, to get up: both Merida and Hiccup peeked over the well's edge above ground at the same time, scanning the surrounding area for any threat. It was strange lengths to go to, but what choice did she have? She had been the one to down Toothless, though she wouldn't admit that the strange viking boy was growing on her. She had never met anyone her age worth talking to. "Psst," he whispered, making a quick gesture over at the castle's front doors: only one guard stood there, and yes, she could see why Hiccup would be worried. Tam was a big lad, physically thick as an oak tree and equally as strong, but blindly devoted to the royal family - if Merida asked any other guard to turn a blind eye, they would have reported it to Queen Elinor immediately. Not Tam. "Shh. I'll be right back," Merida told Hiccup, and sure that no-one was watching, crept over the well's edge and out onto the soft snow.

She stood up straight and dusted herself off, thinking quickly over her previous princess lessons. Walk straight, talk clear and soft, Queen Elinor instructed, but there was room to maneuver - Tam was almost a friend, much less a guard.

"Mornin', Tam!"

"Princess!"

"Tam, could you do me a favour?" She asked, speaking calmly and enunciating properly. "There seems to be a commotion down in the Village near the baker's stand. It seems my lovely brothers are up to no good, but I'm late for my... duties, so would you go down and have a look for them? I'd be most grateful."

"Anythin' for ya, Princess." The guard nodded immediately, setting off to find the triplet princes. Merida grinned as she watched him leave, and the second he was out of eyesight, darted over to help Hiccup out of the well.

"You know, you actually sound nice speaking like that," Hiccup commented, not too sure if it was a joke or not; she just rolled her eyes and the two hurried up to the door, Merida opening it just a crack to check for other guards, or worse, parents. It must have been her lucky day because, to her utter glee, there was no-one around. But her glee faded quickly. An empty castle was never a good sign, but she had more pressing things to deal with.

"Come on, quickly," she said, ushering him in first and closing the door behind her. Hiccup wanted to take a moment and stare at the vast stone walls, the tapestries that decorated them, the winding staircases and the fact there seemed to be a bear on almost everything, but he couldn't. Partly because there was no time, partly because the Princess had taken his hand, and was now hurriedly leading him down the corridor in the direction of the tower. Her hand was small, but her nimble fingers were covered with callouses,

obviously worn by many years archery practice; in her eyes, his hand was just as strong, clearly the hands of a metal-worker. A dragon rider. The archer and the dragon rider's hands fit nicely together, though neither were thinking about that as she barreled round corners and up stairs, leading him to the exact spot of the opening that hid the passage to the tower where Toothless was now hiding.

They were both out of breath by the time they arrived. "In there. Up the stairs. Make sure that the dragon is absolutely silent where he first sees yeh, okay? You go first."

Hiccup just nodded, subconsciously disappointed that she let go of his hand, grunting as his metal foot scraped uncomfortably against the stone of the unnoticeable gap in the wall. The gap opened into a short hallway, where a door stood at the end, leading to a flight of stairs up to the roof. As soon as Hiccup's brown head appeared through the hatch, the dragon waiting for him was ready to pounce. "No-no-no-no-NO, Toothless!" But it was too late, Toothless had launched himself at his friend, skidding and clattering noisely against the hatch door. Merida shoved them both out of the way, crawling up onto the roof and to the edge of the tower on her belly, barely peeking over the walls to make sure no-one was looking. Only one guard on the opposing tower had noticed and her heart began to race; the guard apparently thought nothing of it though and turned back to face his lookout.

"At the risk o' soundin' like mah mother, _WILL-YEH-BOTH-BE-CAREFUL!"_ She hissed through her clenched teeth and Toothless growled low in his belly, unhappy that he shouldn't be excited to see his friend again. "Shh, it's fine," Hiccup said, putting his arms around the dragon's thick black neck. "We're both okay now, we're going to stay here until you're all fixed up, okay bud?"

Merida gasped, exasperated, and flopped down onto her back, closing her eyes to the sky. Hiccup, however, noticed a few things strewn around the roof: a couple of pillows, several sheets, and a full quiver of arrows. "Come up here a lot?"

"Hmm," Merida mumbled in affirmation, unwilling to talk after the stress of getting them both up there safely.

"Seems like a nice place to hide."

"Mhm."

He sighed and took a seat, Toothless curling around his back to give him something to lean on. "Thank you." Hiccup said, unable to look at the Princess, who rolled up and onto one elbow in response, looking at him directly.

"For what?"

"Giving _me_ _us_, a place to hide, too."

"Ah know our kingdoms have had their quarrels, but... it cannae be that bad."

Hiccup lapsed in to silence as he thought about it. No, Berk wasn't bad. But it wasn't Berk he was avoiding.

"Tell me about it," Merida said.

"Berk?"

"Aye. It's about time for yer life story, ah reckon."

"Well... you know, the whole son-of-the-chief thing." He paused to sigh and run a hand through his hair, coming to rest on his neck which he rubbed in frustration. "Thing is, I'm not a viking. I don't look like a viking, I don't talk like a viking, and Odin knows I don't act like one - I'm the one who domesticated the dragons and yeah, that was cool, and for a while I was a hero, but now everybody expects more from me. What do I have to do to impress these people? And of course, if someone's beloved pet gronckle accidentally burns their house down, who's to blame? Not the dragon, no. Me. I'm expected to fix it. Dad, just... he knows what or who I am is never gonna change, he just wants me to pretend that it will."

"Now there's a familiar story."

"What is your story?" Hiccup said, instantly lifting his head to meet her eyes; in time, he'd figure out his own problem, but he knew almost nothing of her background. "What's with the bears everywhere? I mean, you mentioned them a few times, but I didn't wanna... start a conversation I shouldn't have."

"It goes like this. All mah god-given life mah mother has been teachin' me Princess nonsense. Walk straight, Merida. Talk clearly, Merida. No weapons on the table, Merida. The lords have just arrived, Merida, and tomorrow you'll pick which one of their first-born sons you want to marry!"

For reasons he didn't understand, Hiccup's heart sank. "What happened?"

"Well, ah didnae wanna marry no stranger! So when the games came around - ah picked fer them to dae archery, which was an absolute_mess_ - and entered mahself, bein' first born o' DunBroch and what-have-yeh. Won the competition hands down an' mum got upset. I tore her tapestry with mah sword and then she took mah special bow from me and threw it in the fire. I ran away, met a witch, asked her to change mah fate. She gives me a cake to give to mum and next thing ah know, mum's a bear! Anyway, I had teh fix everythin', and she finally understands that I want mah freedom - so did the boys, by the way, they wanted tae choose their own wives - and even she's loosened up a bit hersel', but she just winnae let this whole royal thing go. I want mah bow on the table, damn it!" Merida sighed and shook her hair about. "I tried mah best afterwards, to please her. Even 'dated' Young MacGuffin but... he was nice n' all, n' I liked him, but he had to go back to his land. And she just cannae let it - any of it! - go."

"You... changed your mother into a bear."

"Aye. Mah dad was the bear king anyway like, but he'll wannae tell you the story himsel'."

"Wait, you think I could meet him?"

Merida's eyes widened as she realized what she had said. "Aye," she said carefully. "He widnae turn yeh away, I dinnae think, yer my friend now so... whit can he say, really?"

"I'm your friend?"

"Have we no already established that yer ears work?"

8. Chapter 8

****Author's Note:**** I'm going to be naming the Lords' sons, and for future reference, Young MacGuffin is called 'Ian'. The other two will come later!

* * *

><p>They sat for hours on the rooftop, talking over their stories in great detail: Hiccup's eyes would widen at the mention of magic, not quite convinced; Merida sat enraptured as he told her of how his life flashed before his eyes, faced with the Red Death; she listened intently as he recounted what it was like to wake up with only one leg; she felt the emotion in his voice as he told her of how he came to be accepted in Berk. Her favourite stories, though, were the ones he told about the grand adventures he and Toothless had been on - listening to the dragon stories, the stark blue afternoon had faded through to evening, and there she was, still hanging on his every word.<p>

"So there we are, just about to plunge into the water, when-

"Merida!" King Fergus called, his booming, almost dragonesque voice resonating from far below, cutting Hiccup's sentence short. Usually, when Merida was summoned, it was Queen Elinor, or even Maudie, doing the searching; rarely ever did her father call for her this way. Hiccup looked at her tentatively, immediately more anxious now that he'd heard her father's voice: with a voice as big as that, then the man would have to be ten times bigger. Merida laid flat on her belly and shuffled to the tower's edge, waving a silent 'shh!' at both Toothless and Hiccup, who shuffled to the edge as well. He choked. Down on the ground, just outside the castle walls stood a man obviously king, a man equal to his father's stature but possibly a little bit taller. At his side was the Queen, who Hiccup recognized from the morning; she was walking gracefully, one hand daintily holding the bottom of her skirt up, the other clasped on the Fergus' forearm.

Fergus stopped and turned to his wife, placing both hands on her shoulders; his hefty frame almost overpowering her slender figure, but not quite. He looked just as wild as his daughter did, Hiccup thought, but it was easy to see how well the more restrained Queen complimented him. "Get back inside, lass. It's no righ' for yeh teh wander out here in the cold."

"Oh Fergus," Elinor smiled, quickly turning into a sigh. "Merida... she doesnae want to be around me much, after last night. Was I too harsh on her, dear?"

"Aye, dear, yeh were. Yer intentions are gud, but let the girl be. Ah

would think yeh'd have learned yer lesson by now."

Elinor closed her eyes gently. "I just... want her to be happy, Fergus. But she's got to learn the responsibility of carrying a kingdom on your shoulders."

"Dear, I'm the king, and ah still dinnae know if I understand it."

Elinor laughed, brightening up and giving her husband and affectionate kiss. "Well, we'd better find her. The lords shan't be kept waiting."

Merida gasped but quickly clamped her hand to her mouth, trying desperately to take back the sound; in an instant she had slunk down from the tower wall, disappearing from sight. Hiccup almost dived down, too; but instead he watched Queen Elinor laugh as Fergus swooped her up in his arms, declaring that her feet 'wouldnae touch the ground, if he had his way'. Hiccup had never seen a couple act that way, especially a pair of respectable adults; something in him wondered if his own mother and father had ever behaved the same way. Merida pulled him away from the edge with a thud, his thoughts dissolving immediately as he saw the terror in her eyes.

"The Lords are here!" She hissed, her hands grabbing up at her curls in frustration. "Why could they possibly be here? The last time they were here, they..."

Hiccup's eyes widened. "You don't think...?"

"Aye, ah do. They've brought their bloody sons back. ARGH! Hiccup, how could they dae this to me? They know how I feel about it!"

Merida looked on the verge of tears and, before he could think about it, Hiccup pulled her in for a sat quietly for a few minutes before he noticed what he'd done. Hiccup gulped, almost letting his hands drop to his sides in embarrassment, but she burrowed closer into his chest, unwilling to face the world. Fireworks were going off in his gut, stirring up all sorts of emotions that he didn't understand, or even want to deal with - he just rested his head on hers, tentatively patting her hair. When she came up, the fear in her eyes was gone, leaving behind something more even more sad. Anger.

"It's not just me involved this time. It's you. I'm gonnae have to be able teh sneak yeh down to the metal works, past the lords, past the sons, past _Ian-_"

"Ian?"

"-past the triplets, and definitely, definitely past mah parents! And then, it's no like yeh can sleep down there, or even up here. Hell, ah wouldnae let yeh. Yeh need a bed. How the hell am ah gonnae find yeh a bed if the lords are sleepin' in the castle? And their wee armies, too? Aye, well, they'll probably set up camp outside, but damn it, I am not lettin' yeh sleep on a roof and ah'm definitely no _pickin a damn husband!_"

Hiccup smiled crookedly despite himself. "You're gonna get me a bedroom?"

"Dae yeh want teh sleep up here, like?"

"Well, it wouldn't be that bad, I mean, your winter is like summer for Berk. This is nothing."

She wasn't in the mood to ask, and definitely not in the mood to smile. "Would yeh like teh stay up here wi' Toothless just now, or come inside? Yeh can wait in mah room, but either way, I'm gonnae have teh go."

Hiccup looked over at Toothless, who seemed to be perfectly content. The dragon had lit a small fire at which he was now resting, but he caught his friend's eye, and nodded his consent that inside was probably best. Hiccup sighed, uncomfortable with the idea of being in her room, in her house when so many people were around, but his curiosity got the better of him. "Let's go."

"Will you be alright up here on yer own?" Merida asked Toothless, who raised his head to meet her hand. She could help the small smile the spread across her lips, still utterly entranced by the dragon. "Alright, boy. I'll bring him back. Hopefully in one piece," she sighed, opening the hatch door, and with one last look at Toothless, the boy and girl were gone.

Down the rickety wooden stairs they went, Merida walking ahead but stopping every now and again to brush a long-forgotten cobweb from their path. They walked in silence, but Hiccup could feel the emotion radiating from her: it wasn't only her hair that reminded him of fire, but the way sparks seemed to fly from her at every moment. They sneaked out the long corridor and she threw her hand out, pressing him against the wall; she could hear the loud, toneless singing of her father and his company coming from the main hall. It was imperative that they were silent, fading into the shadows like Toothless had faded into the sky the very first night they met. Merida pointed, gesturing for Hiccup to follow.

Off they went, sneaking and slipping through halls and doors, weaving up and down staircases so much it made him feel lightheaded. Much like his village, the castle was a never-ending maze, but she took every step with confidence, knowing the castle's routes like the back of her hand. Suddenly, she came to a halt by yet another bear carving and Hiccup wobbled on his metal leg, Merida grabbing his hand to steady him. "Shh," she whispered lowly, pulling him around another corner and into a nook behind a wall. Voices approached from near by, and their pounding hearts resonated in the darkness, watching in anticipation as the talking figures emerged into what little sight they had: Maudie and the kitchen maids wobbled around the corner and away again, talking animatedly about the feast going on down stairs. Merida exhaled. "That was close."

"So are we," Hiccup blurted, all too aware of the proximity they shared.

"Come off it, yeh big wally," she said in exasperation, using his hand to drag him out of the spot and back into the hallways, leading him in silence again as they drew closer to the main hall and her bedroom, the barks and yells of the assembled crowd growing larger and more boisterous with every step. Hiccup's eyes widened as they approached the spaced wooden balcony and stairs overlooking the party

- it was a mess of flying food, wailing bagpipes and tartan as far as the eye could see. Worst of all though, they could see the top of the Queen's head coming up the stairs - they couldn't move for the fear, but Elinor had stopped on her step, turning around to face the crowd with a gentle laugh, leaving the pair just enough time to sneak up the opposing stairs and into Merida's bedroom.

9. Chapter 9

Door safely shut behind them, it was all Merida could do just to wander forward to her bed, and with a great exhale, flop face-forward onto it and bury her head within the sheets. Hiccup wasn't quite so comfortable: it was the first time he'd ever been in someone else's bedroom, let alone a girl's, but he had to admit, it was nice. Several small rectangular windows broke up the stone of the far wall and even from his distant position the stars of the winter's night twinkled clearly, and everything in the room, from the simple four-poster bed to the sword and scabbard hanging above the fireplace, was bathed in moonlight. "Wow," Hiccup mumbled, gingerly trailing his hand along the wall as he meandered around the room, so unlike his own.

"Mmph," Merida muttered in response, her words muffled by blankets.

He smiled as he crossed towards one of the windows and traced the outlines on it's glass. "Not enunciating properly, Merida. What would your mother say?"

Though she couldn't speak properly in her slumped position, Merida could hear just fine and sat upright instantly, her hair bouncing around her shoulders and her face decorated with an exhausted but devilish smile. "Dinnae you start."

They both laughed and she got up, momentarily forgetting her worries to spark a flame in the waiting hearth and drag two chairs to it's front. The room lit up with the warmth and Hiccup's eyes widened regarding the unoccupied chair next to the one in which his new friend now sat, her legs sprawled over it's arms in a most unladylike fashion; in the wood were intricate carvings, all of which followed one common theme.

"Does everything in this castle have a bear on it?!"

Merida just laughed. "Sit down, ye ninny. If yer gonna be here a while, yeh might as well get comfy."

Hiccup obeyed and took a seat and the pair sat in silence for a while, just basking in the pleasant heat; he gradually grew more relaxed, even coming to slump his position, and the stress of the day was almost forgotten until there was a sharp knock at the door, both teenagers scrambling from their chairs in a fit of noise and panic. "Merida? Are you back, dear?" The Queen called from outside, utterly confused by the sounds, but reasoned it down to her daughter just being her usual unpredictable self.

"Uh... yes mum! Just coming! Wait right there!" Merida called back, frantically searching for a place to hide Hiccup. The bed. Under the bed. A common hiding place, but it was dark enough under there that

her mother wouldn't have been able to see him. "Under there!" She hissed, thrusting her pointed finger towards the floor and Hiccup was too worried to think, just hitting the floor with an almighty thud and shuffled into position; she grunted unhappily at the noise, but made for the door, nervously straightening the already-straight blue wool of her dress.

When she pulled the door open, all Hiccup could see from the floor was a cloud of green satin glide into the room and his heart thundered, knowing that Queen Elinor was now just feet away.

"Oh mercy! Look at you! You're not even ready, and we cannot have you looking like that before the lords!"

"The Lords, Mother?" Merida replied, trying to sound innocent, but barely able to contain the rage boiling inside her. The Queen instantly frowned.

"He didnae tell you, did he?"

"What?"

"Och, that man! Should never trust him with a simple task. If you want something done, you've got to do it yourself," Elinor muttered, putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head with a reluctant amusement, knowing then that Fergus hadn't told their daughter that the Lords were coming.

With every second it became harder and harder for Merida to keep her anger at bay, but she forced the lump in her throat down, focused on maintaining her composure. She wasn't going to be caught short.

"Why are the lords here, Mother?"

Elinor smiled softly and brushed a stray curl from Merida's face, and the Princess' heart sank. It was true. They were going through with it.

"

"Well, last year, a certain young lady with flaming red hair decided that tradition ought to be re-written..."

"Mum, no!"

"... and in her quest for her freedom, she turned a certain Queen into - if could ye believe it - a bear! Well now, the lords were assembled, waiting for the Princess to choose a suitor, but she had a much bigger problem to deal with. In time, she - and the Queen, learned a very valuable lesson. And remember what I told you, Merida? _Legends are lessons?_ Our story - _your_ story - has become legend. My lovely girl... you've taught the whole kingdom a lesson. Our young people may now choose whom they will marry, whom they will love, and it is thanks to you."

"Eh?"

"It's been exactly a year since you taught us all the meaning of freedom, so, in honour of your legend, your father and I decided to gather the lords and celebrate! Now, I did ask your father to tell

you - I've been so busy preparing the festival - but I should have known better," Elinor paused to shake her head, still smiling. "I know I still push you, dear. And I know it's not easy for you. But you're my number one priority, and this _little party_ is to say thank you. So... what do you think?"

Merida stood there, completely dumbstruck, gazing at nothing in particular as she thought it over. An anniversary _festival?_ For _that?_ _Well, it made more sense than having to go through the whole thing again - maybe Queen Elinor hadn't regressed into her old ways, maybe they had really moved past it all, maybe she was _truly_ free.

"Oh, you don't like it," Elinor sighed again, but sadly, her voice sounding completely defeated.

The Princess looked up into her mother's face, the disappointment evident on every line, in every pore, and Hiccup laid under the bed, forgotten but relieved; happy that her parents had done something so thoughtful, happier still that Merida wouldn't have to choose a suitor.

"Oh Mum, I love it!" Merida burst out, jumping up and down on the spot with excitement. "Dad's bound to be happy that the lads are back, and there's gonna music, and games, right? And feasts?"

"Aye, dear. We have an archery tournament planned, just for you! And maybe we can see what those boys are _really_ made of!" The Queen said, remembering the lords' sons' lack of prowess and allowing herself a rare wicked laugh.

Merida gawped. "Mum!"

"What?" The Queen replied, shrugging innocently.

The girl whirled past the bed, a hurricane of flying fabric and relieved laughter, dancing and twirling with joy. "Mum, this is great!"

"And it's going to be alright for you, seeing MacGuffin's boy?" Elinor asked quietly, causing Merida to stop instantly. Hiccup's heart lurched. That, he realized, must be the one she told him about, the one potential suitor that she did care to see more than once.

There was a pause and Hiccup couldn't help peeking out further from under the bed, just wanting to see the look on his friend's face. "Aye mum, nae bother. What's done is done."

"...Well then dear, let's get you into your lovely blue dress. You might not want to marry any of them, but you're still their Princess."

Merida grinned. "Nae corset, though."

Elinor's eyes bulged, but reluctantly nodded; Merida's subsequent laugh ringing throughout the room as she pulled her mother in for a hug. They stood there for a silent minute; mother-daughter affection had been rare before 'the incident', but now, they were back to being close (if for the odd blip) and Queen or not, Elinor couldn't have

been more grateful - she stroked her daughter's mass of wild hair, letting a few stray tears drip down her cheeks.

"Do me a favour, dear?" Her mother asked, going to fetch the princess' ceremonial gown from the chest.

"Yes mum?"

"Let your hair loose. You don't need to look _too_ formal."

Merida smiled. "_That_ I can do."

10. Chapter 10

****Author's Note:**** Hi everyone - unfortunately, I've run into an unforeseen circumstance offline and, much to my reluctance, I don't think I'll be able to update as often! :(However I'll try to keep writing and update if I can, but for now, I hope you can bear with me. :) Thanks for all your support, favourites and reviews - they're very much appreciated (and I'd love a few more ;D)

(PS: I'll be naming the Lords' sons now!)

* * *

><p>Queen Elinor had gone as quickly as she had come, this time taking an occasion-appropriate Merida with her and, having quickly doused the fire, left Hiccup in the dark. Just a mere twenty-four hours ago (or maybe more, he couldn't remember), the boy was back on Berk, facing off against his father, the Chief. Now here he was, separated from his dragon and hiding under the bed in the bedroom of a strange, uninhabited princess who had, in fact, just changed while he was in the room - not that he saw anything, but his already sky-high anxiety had been pushed to the limit. In the darkness, a distressed Hiccup could swear he heard his heart beating, and he almost resigned himself to staying in his hiding spot, fearful that if he even moved a muscle, the floor would split open and he'd find himself subject to the wrath of all DunBroch. From the crack beneath the door, the sounds of merriment leaked into Merida's bedroom, and he heard a large, joyous yell: the Princess, it seemed, had joined the party.<p>

Downstairs in the main hall, the celebrations had been in full swing for quite some time, even if she, the guest of honour, hadn't been there: Lord Dingwall's face with almost purple with the drink; King Fergus was standing on his throne and singing tunelessly, the other lords providing his backing chorus; men were brawling, food covered every table and bagpipes blared all around. The noise was momentarily silenced when Elinor glided down the stairs, smiling graciously to all people with Merida hot on her heels, stomach crying for a good feast. The Princess found her way to the 'youngins table' almost instantly, waving at the lords as she walked by and eagerly plopped herself down on the bench next to her triplet brothers, setting about a large chicken leg without haste. (Elinor, who was 'proudly' looking on from her throne, wasn't best pleased at the way Merida gobbled.)

The redhead was too preoccupied with her haggis-on-bread to notice when Hiccup crawled to out of the bedroom to peek into the

celebrations, and she was certainly too preoccupied to notice when three bodies filled the empty bench opposite: the Lords' sons sat in front of her, one more reluctant than the others.

"Evenin', Princess," Cameron Macintosh half-purred, trying to be nonchalant as he ran his hand through his long, black locks, causing several of the other assembled girls to swoon; Merida just grunted, mouth full of bread and haggis, so engrossed in the bounty of food around her that she didn't notice his disappointed glare. He nudged the vacant blond boy sitting next to him, gesturing madly in the princess' direction, suggesting that he should try to get her attention instead.

"Hi...?" Finlay Dingwall offered and Merida finally looked up, acknowledging the blond with a smile. In her heart, she had a soft spot for him: it was hard to hate someone so naive and well-meaning, and the pair had become fast friends after the suitors' Games, Merida feeling somewhat protective of the oblivious boy. "Hello, Finlay. You alright?" She asked, and he just nodded, a pink blush spreading across his cheeks. Knowing a decent conversation was unlikely, she turned back to the table again, grabbing a bowlful of potatoes and dumping some onto her plate.

The third boy wouldn't dare speak up. It was hard enough knowing that not everyone understood him, but the idea of speaking to someone he once attempted courting was truly terrifying. Still, Cameron thrust his bony elbow into MacGuffin's large frame, illiciting something between a squeak and a groan. "Merida," Ian blurted, and she looked up, staring him straight in the eye, completely unaware of the viking boy watching from the balcony. "Hello, Ian," Merida replied calmly, feeling a rare twang of sadness; in another life, she could have seen herself with him. Ian wasn't quite like the others, he wasn't dopey or conceited: despite the impression of his large frame, he was in fact kind and gentle, but it just wasn't right. To be with him would have meant leaving DunBroch for his land until the day that the King and Queen were no longer able to perform their duty, upon which time they would return and he would become King - Merida couldn't handle that. The thought of being in a foreign kingdom was bad enough (though she did not seem it, she was fiercely devoted to her own land) but the idea of being away from her family was beyond painful. She looked up and their eyes locked, both finally addressing the issue; they weren't in love, they had never reached that point, but there had been potential, and that was enough. Merida sighed.

From the balcony, the viking boy was overwhelmed by the celebration: the only thing louder than the music (which was loud enough, the bagpipes and fiddles blaring the sort of jaunty tunes that just demanded a dance - even he found himself swaying) were the people, and from Merida's descriptions, Hiccup recognized almost everyone; he'd seen enough, almost too much, and his head was reeling from it all - DunBroch sure knew how to throw a party. Instead, Hiccup focused on watching the princess and MacGuffin's interaction, again recognizing him from her descriptions. Of course, the fact that Ian looked like he could toss Hiccup like a caber was immediately off-putting, but he couldn't look away - like Merida and Finlay, Hiccup already felt a sense of protectiveness of her. After all, she had provided him with a place to stay in his time of need, so much so that he almost felt sickly grateful that she'd shot at Toothless just so he didn't have to go home. He sighed, too, just watching.

"Y'alright?" Ian asked in his thick brogue, earning a confused look from Cameron; Merida turned back to reply but instead, something caught her attention far above his head: she spotted Hiccup and locked eyes with him, her own bright blues widening with shock. Even through the massive space between them, Hiccup could see her surprise, her aggravation, but he just couldn't have stayed away. Curiosity was in his nature, and the sounds, the smells, everything had just been so enticing, and even though he knew the danger, it was a sight worth seeing for himself. Back on the bench and barely registering the boys sounds of concerned at her faraway gaze, Merida pressed her fingernails into the palm of her hand, trying desperately to contain herself; she couldn't just leap up from the table and go drag the escapee back to her room, even if she wanted to - it would arouse too much suspicion, and in her mind's eye, she could envision the carnage that would follow if anyone found out she had a viking stowaway. No, she had to think make like her mother, keep her rash nature at bay and deal with the situation delicately.

"Yes... I'm... fine," She managed, thinking quickly; under the table she nudged her brother Hamish and shot him a pleading look. Keep them distracted, she thought. Please. Mischievous though the triplets were, they adored their big sister and could obviously tell when she was in need - all three nodded, just once, and softly enough that only she would see. Merida released the breath that had stuck in her lungs and nodded back.

"Reckon my dinner's disagreein' with me, though; do excuse me, gentlemen." Merida added with a slight curtsy, making to leave but in passing she bent down to Hamish' ear and muttered: 'Puddin' for a month.' Overacting didn't occur to her as she pressed her hand to her stomach and tried to feign a mildly sick expression, ducking and weaving through the crowd and, just as she was about to break the throng, King Fergus piped up. "Merida! Y'alright, love?"

"Aye, dad! Ah'm fine - just a naff haggis!" Merida called back, manners forgotten. "Be back soon!" Satisfied with her excuse, King Fergus waved her away; the Princess half-ran up the stairs and, the second she was both far enough from anyone's eyeline and close enough to Hiccup, she grabbed the collar of his fur vest and unceremoniously dragged him back to her room.

11. Chapter 11

****Author's Note:**** Sorry for the slow updating, folks. Not much I can do right now though, so I hope this is alright - however, I did find time to make a cover! Check it out and as always, your reviews, favourites and such are always very much appreciated (and put huge smiles on my face)!

* * *

><p>Both now safely back in her room, Merida used her grip on Hiccup's collar to toss the boy onto the bed without a second thought towards his leg: he stumbled forward and landed face down, but she didn't care. The Princess had already started pacing back and forth in frustration, mumbling and occasionally throwing her arms out when a particularly angry thought demanded such a gesture. Hiccup slowly brought himself to a more dignified position (though his head hung

low, so as not to meet her eye), and though he knew that she had every right to be livid - it had been pretty stupid, after all - he found it hard to regret venturing out. The party he had seen was an image he'd never forget. He could remember every person, every plate, everything down to the last detail; DunBroch was exciting. He'd never ventured into someone else's territory like that, and yet it reminded him a lot of Berk, so much so that he could picture clearly his own father, chief Stoick, drinking amongst the lords like a visiting dignitary or having a friendly sword fight with the Merida's father, the King. With a pang of sadness, he realised that, even though he liked being away from home, it was worth remembering the beauty of his own land. However, his reminiscing was cut short.<p>

"ARE-YEH-MAD?" The Princess finally exclaimed, giving Hiccup a shock as he was torn from his thoughts; Merida had stopped pacing instantly and was now wearing an expression of extreme intensity, the kind that was almost scary. She stomped towards him, arms swinging angrily until she came to stop right in front of him and dipped her head low enough to be right in his face. If he'd been scared of her expression, he was terrified now: she was just inches from him, making his heart thunder like a horse's hooves and beat louder than a dragon's roar. She stared right in his eyes and he was caught, her beautiful bright blue eyes betraying the severity with which she spoke.

"Yeh could've gotten yersel' killed."

Hiccup looked at her quizzically. "That's a little over dramatic, don't you think?"

"No, Hiccup, I don't think. Let's consider the scenarios, shall we? One, mah dad finds you: ah've got a boy in my room and that's bad enough, but then it comes out that you're a VIKING! Well now, the big, bad Bear King sees red and that's it, our kingdoms are at war again, and if mah dad thought it would destroy your dad, you'd be the first tae die! Whether I wanted you spared or no! Secondly, mah mum finds you: pretty much the same thing. She goes berserk that 'ah-couldnae-just-pick-a-nice-local-boy' and tells my father, at which point situation number one would start all over again. Thirdly, the Lords or the boys find yeh: they dinnae like that their sons werenae good enough but here I am with some strange boy that doesnae speak like we do and - wouldn't yeh know it - it comes out that yer a viking. This is even worse because not only would situation one start again, we'd even be at war with our own clans!"

The boy was stunned to silence. Merida shook her head and where they were close enough, her flame-red curls tickled his skin and sent shivers up his spine. "... that bad?"

"Oh, aye."

Suddenly she whirled away and out of the room yet again leaving Hiccup in a state of confusion. He'd been confused since the moment they met, but like with most women, he'd learned not to question it - his last girlfriend had been fairly similar. Instead he just waited, twiddling his thumbs anxiously and tried not to think about what she'd just said, until she returned, her arms stacked high and overflowing with various materials.

"Uh..."

"Well, I cannae let yeh out mah sight now - no with yer obvious tendency tae _wander_ - so button it while ah make yeh a bed."

Hiccup pondered this for a moment. "Wait, bed? In here? Are you crazy?!"

"Oh, so _you're_ accusin' _me _now, is that right?"

"But, I-I... _what?"_

_"Yeh brought this on yersel'," she paused to snort. "Dragon on the roof, boy under the bed. What would mah mother think?"

Again, Hiccup was stunned to silence and could only sit there as Merida threw her bundle on the mattress next to him, quickly selecting a bear pelt or two and slinging them under her bedframe. "It's no gonnae be comfortable, but yer gonnae have to get over it," she said, grabbing a handful of other soft things and throwing them in a sack to form a pillow, which she also tossed to the floor. "Choice of blanket's up to you," Merida added. "Pick yer poison."

Hiccup was too dumbstruck to respond, just blankly prodding at the remaining pile and pulling out a bunch of sheets. "Um..."

"Aye, well then. There's yer bed - which yeh'd better get comfy in quick, because mum and dad must think ah'm sound asleep with sickness by now. Be right back." Merida gathered the unused materials and left the room to put them back wherever she found them, Hiccup dutifully climbing down off her bed and slipping into what passed for 'his' underneath. Strangely, it wasn't awful. It was nice and dark, the sack pillow was oddly squishy and even the pelts - which at first made him feel a bit uneasy - were soft and thick, enough to make him forget about the hard stone floor. Exhaustion took over him easily and, even though he wanted to stay awake, he just couldn't. Sleep may have come easily, but waking up was unbearably cruel - under the bed, there would have been no way to see the morning sunlight streaming in through the windows, but the Princess was all too aware.

"RISE AND SHINE, HICCUP! Whit dae ya wanna do first - breakfast (the recommended option), go visit yer dragon, or straight tae work?" She yelled, dipping her head low enough to make sure it really got to him, which it did: Hiccup attempted to bolt upright with the shock, but instead only hit his head on the wooden bed. "What did yeh dae that for?" Merida giggled, bringing herself to a kneel. He shot her a death glare, but it meant nothing to the laughing redhead.

"Ouch. Early. _Why?_" Hiccup murmured, slumping back down, still tired; the Princess was having none of it and took a hold of his arm, the slick bear pelt skidding across the floor as she dragged him out from underneath. "Mornin's young, Hiccup, and I'm _hungry. _I seem tae remember someone interruptin' mah lovely feast last night, so..."

"Seem to remember someone shooting my dragon, too." He half-replied, still laid down but facing away from her, clearly still wanting to sleep.

"Och, shut yer gob. It's time tae eat."

"And how do you intend for me to do that?"

She stopped to think and once she'd decided, poked him hard in the stomach and he flailed, reluctantly awake. "Why would you do that?" He cried.

"Because there's a festival bein' held out in the field, which I dinnae get 'cause it's snowin', but I'm no complainin'. D'yeh know why? Because that means the pantry, and this castle, is _empty."_

"I make a point of not facing danger before eight in the morning."

"Good thing it's nine, then."

Merida left the room briefly, saying that she'd give the boy time to put himself together, and when he was finished, the young pair ventured out of Merida's room, the possibility of getting caught far outweighed by the desire for food - even Hiccup had to admit that he was starving, having not eaten since his last breakfast of spit-roasted salmon again provided by the Princess. Taking a few tentative steps had quickly turned to running, barreling around corners and slipping down corridors, eventually stopping when they were both out of breath and Merida remembered Hiccups' bad leg. The pair stood in a hallway not far from the pantry, huffing-and-puffing, sharing the kind of grin that only two partners-in-crime could. Arm clasped around her ribs, Merida flinched: she heard a noise and immediately grabbed Hiccup, flattening him against the wall with a 'shh!' Still in plain sight, all they could do was wait and hope that the person wouldn't notice them - the castle guard and frequent butt of many a triplet prank, Martin, came ambling around the corner and past the archway and soon he was gone again, moustache now fully recovered where the princes had once cut it. (Only, the opposite side was now missing.)

"How do we keep getting away with this?!"

"Dinnae jinx it!" Merida hissed, gesturing for Hiccup to follow as she left their hallway and snuck down the flight of stairs that led down into the main hall where the previous night's party was held. Soon they were in the abandoned pantry, looking at the food stacked high around them. The boy tried hard not to think about what he would have had, were he on back on Berk, or what his father was having for breakfast at that very moment, instead halfheartedly taking a nearby apple. "Ah wouldnae do that if I were you. Angus needs feedin'... and so dae you." Merida said as she moved forward to reheat a huge iron pot of the party's broth. Hiccup peered into the pot and recoiled, the meaty smell going straight to his gut and awakening a long dormant Viking instinct. He put the apple down immediately.

Merida laughed, stirring the pot until sufficiently heated. "Go to it," she said, stepping back so that Hiccup could get a bowl first - he took one look at her and dished himself some, almost running to the nearest table and wolfing it down without a second thought. Dinnerless evenings meant starving mornings. She stared as he attacked it, allowing herself a small giggle and feeling almost proud that he was eating with such haste. "You were hungry, weren't yeh?"

Hiccup looked up and nodded, mouth still full. Suddenly, an idea came to mind and she went about assembling something, Hiccup too happy with his stew to care - that is, until she turned back with a plateful of haggis and bread. "I'm not eating that," Hiccup blurted, spraying broth across the table.

She smirked. "I'm sure yeh dinnae remember how, so that means I'm still the only one who knows how tae get back tae Toothless..."

12. Chapter 12

"No."

Hiccup looked at the plate that had been placed down on the table, then quickly glanced up at Merida who stood, arms folded, looking completely pleased with himself. Experience told the boy that there was no getting out of this. Girls usually got what they wanted, especially girls like Merida or- well, he decided he'd rather not think about that, and instead thought of the time he once ate fish, half-eaten and just regurgitated fresh from a dragon's stomach. That hadn't exactly been a delicacy, so how bad could it be? The girl nudged the plate towards him. "How dae yeh know yeh don't like it yeh dinnae try?"

"With the bread?" He asked quietly. Merida's grin was brighter and more wicked than ever as she nodded. He took a bit of bread with haggis and quickly shoved it into his mouth, thinking it was better just to get it over with; to his surprise, he didn't hate it. In fact, he liked it - it was something he could see being popular on Berk, and definitely something he could see his father eating by the barrel-ful. Still hungry, he took snuck a hand out and grabbed another bit, hoping his friend wouldn't notice and lord her victory over him. Of course, nothing got past the princess.

"AHHHHHHH, YEH LIKE IT!"

"Mmph." Hiccup mumbled and Merida knew from speaking fluent mouthful that 'mmph' roughly translated to 'oh, shut up.' She laughed heartily as she gathered more breakfast food and sat down across from him, getting stuck in without thought and sending a flurry of crumbs across the large oak table. "Well," she muttered, her own mouth now half full of cold chicken leg, "this is a good breakfast n' all, but I wonder what we can bring yer boy?"

"What?"

"Uh... _Toothless?_"

If Hiccup hadn't known better, he would have sworn that his heart stopped momentarily. How could he have been so _careless_, leaving his own best friend like that? Here it was, only the next day and, though the dragon was always on his mind, it wasn't exactly like Hiccup was doing his duty of feeding him and, more importantly, fixing his tail-wing. The viking's head dropped into his hands as Merida watched, still feeling very much the guilty party. It was all well and good that she'd made a new friend in this foreign stranger, but she _had_ _harmed_ them, and it wasn't very royal to let someone down like that. She sighed, but it wasn't in her nature to ruminate.

Action was what they needed. "How long will it take to fix his wing?" She asked, gingerly playing with the cake on her plate.

"Not long, I guess, I mean, I've had a lot of practice, this isn't the first time I've had to... make revisions. Maybe a day? Day-and-a-half?"

Merida looked at him curiously. "Ah go by the metal-works often tae get new arrowheads, and they certainly wouldnae be able to make what ah saw in a day..."

Hiccup blushed.

"...well, that's good then. First, we visit Toothless. Well actually no, I'll take yeh up to Toothless then go out huntin', bring the poor beast some brekkie, then after yeh've visited fer a good while, we'll go down the metal-works n' you make, I'll stand guard."

"Uh, yeah, two problems with that. I mean, is it actually okay I use the materials-"

"I owe yeh a debt, Hic. Plus, they'll definitely no notice and, hey, mah dad's the King so, plenty more where that came from!"

Hiccup stared at her for a moment, acknowledging what she said but focusing more on the fact she'd called him 'Hic.' Nobody had ever called him that before, and it was pretty ridiculous for a nickname, but he couldn't stop his cheeks from flushing. "Uh, okay but... what about you? This party thing is kinda about you so..."

"Oh hell. Ah will have tae put in an appearance alrigh', but ah think ah can play it like ah'm still sick. We can do this nae bother if we keep our wits about us."

"I've been on high alert since I first dropped in so... no problem?"

Merida laughed and stood up from the table, slapping him on the back appreciatively. "Well then. Let's go."

Fate doesn't always work in your favour and that was something all the clans were there to honour, but it wasn't on the forefront of the teenagers minds when they left the pantry and had quickly made their way up to where the hidden entrance to Toothless was hiding. In fact, the entrance was in sight when Merida heard a noise coming from the opposing hallway and had to shove Hiccup into a nearby wardrobe, mumbling her apologies and telling him that, should the worst come to pass, to go on to Toothless and she'd meet him up there with food later. The noise grew closer and the Princess' heart thundered and she took to leaning against an open window, seeing the proceedings outside and breathing the fresh air to try and calm her nerves.

"Merida? There you are!" From the crack in the wardrobe door, Hiccup watched as Queen Elinor emerged from the corridor, as striking as she had been the first time he'd seen her: tall and statuesque in her green and gold-threaded gown, the Queen carried the kind of presence that commanded attention and Merida turned her head immediately, red curls flying in all directions, heart still not steady enough. "Hi, Mum!" She tried breezily, trying too hard to be nonchalant. Having a

mother's intuition, Elinor could tell something was up, but knowing her daughter, did not want to press too hard.

"What are you doing all the way out here, dear? I did stop by your room."

"Oh, well, uh, I... needed some fresh air." Merida said quickly, gesturing to the window and taking a dramatic sniff. "Ah. Nice. Clean. Air back in lungs, definitely feeling better!"

Elinor smiled. "Well if you're feeling that good, then I'm sure you won't mind coming down to the festival now? The lords' are still eager to see you and... maybe you could keep an eye on the boys, they've been giving me such bother all morning. If you'd come and keep them occupied...?"

Merida's heart sank, just nodding and smiling as her mother breathed a sigh of relief and hugged her, then laid a hand on her back, gently steering her away from the window - and away from Hiccup and Toothless. Once he was sure the coast was clear (about 20 minutes after they'd actually gone, just to be on the safe side), Hiccup attempted to climb from the wooden chest and promptly fell with a thud, resolving to drag himself to the window and peer out into the vast open field beyond DunBroch castle. He could see her, an unmistakable streak of aqua - the dress she'd worn the night before - and bright orange, and all he could now do was go to Toothless; the dragon, of course, was absolutely ecstatic when he caught the first glimpse of brown hair peeking through the trap door. For a creature, a legend used to adventure, being on a tiny rooftop was possibly the most boring experience of his life and the dragon pounced on the boy as soon as his body was clear of the stairs.

"Good to see you too, bud!"

Hiccup put his arms around the dragon's thick onyx neck and the pair hugged for just enough time for them both to be satisfied with the reunion, and to maintain their feeling of masculinity. Toothless made a guttural sound, one that the viking boy took to mean 'where's the girl?' and all he could say was: "I guess now we just wait."

The girl, in fact, was out in the field, admiring the spread her parents had put on. It reminded her of the Suitor's Games, but instead of feeling the anxiety of a life not her own, Merida was now fending off the anxiety of harbouring a dangerous Viking stranger and his pet dragon and being so far away from them both, when, in reality, she just wanted to fix the creature's damn tail-fin. How could she possibly enjoy the grand wooden stands in which the highland dancers danced, or watching the men fling their cabers, or listening to the sounds of bagpipes, the people and the laughter of her brothers all singing in harmony? It was a visual and aural feast and yet she was so far removed from the situation. 'If Hiccup had never appeared', she thought, allowing herself a bit of misplaced bitterness, 'this would be incredible!'

She weaved her way throughout the tables like a professional, never once faltering or fumbling, walking as tall as her mother but with not quite the same grace. Her arms still swung. She still stomped a bit. Her red curls jumped around her face and back like they were alive. Still she took the time to natter politely with the Lords, thanking them for thanking her for 'liberatin' their lads' and 'doin'

a grand job', letting her cheeks flush pleasantly as Lord Dingwall declared 'yer gonna be a great Queen someday!' until finally, she could take her place in her family's box, sitting on the throne and observing everything, quite unsure of which way to go. Merida wanted to participate. She truly did. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she could see the waters of the creek, could feel the thunder of Angus' hooves below her, could smell the winter breeze of the forest and could feel the slippery scales of the salmon between her hands.

The Princess smiled, knowing there wasn't much else she could do.

13. Chapter 13

Waiting had never been Hiccup's strong suit, and this period was becoming particularly annoying - though Toothless was always great company (despite the dragon's obvious frustration) and they'd found a game to play to pass the time, the viking boy could not restrain his wandering mind: what was going on down there? The assembled crowd were far away but the sound of their joy carried on the wind, and not for the first time, the boy found himself wishing he wasn't a Viking, that he could just stroll down there and out onto the field so that he and Toothless could join in the party. Picturing the festival had become almost painful, his own frustrated mind conjuring up images of fantastic feasts, like the admittedly-delicious Scottish cuisine that'd he'd sampled just an hour or so ago, and the games - what exactly was a _caber toss? -_ but, most importantly, he wondered just what Merida was doing. Bow-in-hand, the redhead had shot them out of the sky and then used the very same weapon to get them breakfast, so Hiccup knew that what he'd seen of her skill was limited - the Queen had mentioned that there would be an archery tournament in the Princess' honour, and more than anything else, that's what Hiccup would have liked to watch. He hoped that there'd come a time where he could see his new fiery friend in action, but for now, he could only guess what she was doing.

Fortunately for him, Merida was doing precisely one thing, the same thing that he and Toothless were doing: wishing that she was somewhere else. The Princess was looking across the field of people but not seeing a thing, much too preoccupied with her own thoughts to notice when her mother came to sit in the royal box; when Callum Macintosh sauntered up, smirk-on-face and other-sons-in-tow; and far, far too far gone to care when Queen Elinor called her name, her voice straining with both the desire to maintain her usual composure and the clear dissatisfaction that, despite all her lessons, Merida was yet again ignoring correct protocol and not acknowledging her public. Queen Elinor had to call her name at least three more times (both she and the boys were obviously mortified) before the redhead dreamily turned her head in the wrong direction, facing her mother instead of the Lords' sons. Elinor's face fell and so did Merida's. "What did I do this time...?"

"Merida, _dear," _The Queen said as politely as she could through her gritted teeth, "you have company. Do excuse me," and with that, Elinor drew herself up to full height and clasped her hands daintily in front of her, head shaking with disappointment as she glided away. The Princess' head swung around to the other side. "Oh, it's you," She blurted, yet again forgetting her manners. Finlay Dingwall was

unfazed as usual, in his own little world like Merida had been, but both Callum and Ian bristled - the former not used to being ignored, the latter much too uncomfortable in his 'ex-girlfriend's' presence. She straightened up and forced herself to smile. "Good morning, lads. The snow sure is lovely, isn't it?" Weather was an awful small-talk topic to rely on, but she never did have her mother's way with words, nor her patience: Merida couldn't stand the feeling of inaction and so she stood up, giving the lads a gentle nod and excusing herself in the most elegant way she could - running as soon as her feet touched the grass. No amount of triplet mayhem could distract a well-experienced mother and, boys in hand, Elinor watched as the figure of her only daughter faded into the festival and soon, she was gone.

The Queen handed the boys to Maudie for a moment and approached her husband, who was sitting with the Lords and men, so engrossed in a Mor'du-slaying conversation that he'd slammed his sword down through the table, the hilt now sticking up through the wood. "She's gone, Fergus."

The Bear King turned forgot his conversation instantly when he heard the concern in her voice, and like always, instantly gave his number one priority his full attention. "Ach, let the girl be, love. She's best off daein' her own thing. That's kind o' the point o' this, isn't it?"

If Merida had heard what he'd said, she would have agreed wholeheartedly, but as it was she had already been to the pantry and grabbed some apples for Angus, who was, as always, ready to leave with her on a moment's notice; much like the dragon of her viking friend, Angus the horse was all too aware of his owner, especially knowing that she wasn't where she should have been, but he - obviously - couldn't question it, instead willing to be by her side, and even more so when she brought snacks. He took the apples she offered and ate greedily as the Princess climbed onto his back, fastening her bow around her shoulders and hoisting a sack onto his side.

"Yer no the only one who needs breakfast," she muttered, patting his head before gently nudging his side, and the horse bolted from the stable, out into the forest and back to their favourite creek where they had first met Hiccup and Toothless; Merida leaped from her steed's back at the first opportunity, grabbed her bag and went to the water's edge. It didn't usually take much of her concentration to skewer the swimming fish with her arrows, but now, having just stormed out of her own party, it provided some good time to think - she attempted to formulate a decent plan, coming up with something that was nowhere near as intricate or risk-free as it should have been: she was just going to take the fish to Toothless and march Hiccup right down to the metalworks, leave him there and attempt to blend in at the party. It just wasn't in her nature to be detailed. It was all action or nothing.

The sack was soon filled with the spoils of a good half-hour's work and the Princess left the creek with a heavy heart - it was nice for her to have company her own age in Hiccup but still, he was another bullet-point on a list of responsibility that could have wallpapered every room in the castle. She sighed as she climbed back onto Angus, content just to hug him for a while until she could summon the courage to go back, and like the half-hour she had spent away, the

time it took to get back passed much too quickly for her liking. Merida left Angus at the stable once more, ignored the festival and deftly weaved her way through the maze-like hallways back up to 'the Toothless tower', throwing her bag up the hatch before she pulled herself up.

Addressing the dragon directly, she gave his head an appreciative pat and said: "Not stayin' long boy, but I brought yeh some nosh tae keep yeh goin. 'Fraid I'm gonnae have tae steal yer boy, too."

Hiccup was surprised at her sudden appearance, and as always, taken aback by her brashness. "Huh?"

"Been doin' some thinkin', Hic. Way I see it, if everyone's out there-" Merida waved a hand in the general direction of the games, "-there's got tae be less chance o' yeh gettin' caught. Right?"

"Uh... I guess...?"

"Right. Get yersel' together then, cos' it's time tae go."

Just like that, Hiccup found himself in a large room far beneath the main hall with a huge furnace and weapons littering every available work-top, and was transported back to Gobber's place on Berk, homesickness momentarily taking over him. What he didn't know was that, in the real workshop a day's dragon ride away, Berk was missing him too: Chief Stoick the Vast was pacing back and forth through his own best friend's workspace, frantic with a father's worry of having their child go missing. Gobber was sitting and toying with his false hand, patiently waiting for the Chief to get it all out of his system - constantly working with Hiccup meant that the blacksmith knew the boy's nature better than his own father did, and though he wasn't pleased that Hiccup had disappeared for so long, wasn't quite as concerned as Stoick. As far as he was concerned, going missing was just one of Hiccup's many questionable talents.

Stoick was not quite as convinced. "He could be anywhere!" The Chief barked, slamming his mighty fist down on a nearby table.

"Aye, he could be. But let's no forget that we havenae seen his beast in days. If Toothless and Hiccup are together, they'll be just fine-"

"But what if they aren't together? What if they got seperated-"

"Then the dragon will be huntin' Hiccup down with every breath in his body. He'll come back soon-"

"No soon enough, Gobber. We've got tae go find him."

"Have yeh gone mad? Yeh'll just upset the village if yeh go bargain' out o' here in the boats-"

A dark smile crossed Stoick's face. "I'm no takin' the boats."

Gobber leaped up. "Are yeh tryin' to say that yer gonna take the dragons out? And where exactly dae yeh think yer gonna go?"

"I'll go where ever it takes to find my son."

14. Chapter 14

****Author's Note:**** As always, I must apologize for the lack of updates (if I could write more frequently, I would, and if this seems at all rushed I'm sorry) - and once again say that your favourites and reviews are always a joy for me. I grin like an idiot every time! So, thank you so much, your support has been wonderful and I hope you continue to read and enjoy it as much as I'm enjoying writing it!

* * *

><p>The day had come and gone with tireless hours of work: after his initial moment of homesickness (which had caused a five-minute long discussion and ended with an awkward hug), Hiccup had set about working on Toothless' new tail fin - it had been odd, working in a new environment, completely alone without Toothless or even Merida by his side, but through the silence and occasional muttering he had made some great progress. Hiccup was at least halfway done - he'd made so many previous incarnations of the wing that he didn't even need to measure or fit it to the dragon anymore - but staring at the same four walls for hours and hours had become tiring, even claustrophobic; underground and alone, the stone was beginning to close in on the viking boy and, though he did love the metal-working and he was good at it, he wouldn't have minded the company. Going from soaring the skies on the back of his best friend and being caught up in a potentially life-endangering storm of red hair and smuggling to just nothing was a hard adjustment - he hadn't been truly alone in at least a week, and though he usually relished his own company, it had just become sad. The boy put down his tools and sighed, absentmindedly flicking one of the metal rings. He didn't have the heart to work any longer.<p>

Isolated though the viking boy was, the Princess was experiencing the very opposite problem: too many people, not enough time (and even less patience). She had gone to attend the festival for a while and had been roped in to staying longer than she would have liked - Toothless didn't concern her so much, though she did feel bad keeping him confined to the tower, leaving her other fugitive had interrupted her enjoyment of what was supposed to be her party. How could she possibly enjoy teasing Callum MacIntosh with her criminal activity looming in the back of her mind? The only thing she would enjoy for sure was the archery. Just beyond the main area and very much in her eye-line stood three wicker targets, their bases wedged deep into the snow, the bright blue and red of their rings a stark contrast to the soft white landscape beyond. Those were easy. She'd proven her skill on a row just like that before. However, there were other targets that dangled tantalizingly from tree branches and swung from wooden beams, targets clearly just meant just for her. It felt like a long time since she had last used her bow just for the sake of using her bow, so when King Fergus stood up from the table and bellow 'go tae the games!', she was the first to move. Taking her weapon from her shoulder, she notched an arrow while running towards the archery area and let it fly up into the nearby trees where it hid a bullseye, dead center, the kind of hit that only someone with her skill could make. A smile spread across her face, a warm feeling blossoming throughout her. The _twang_ of the bowstring was like music to her ears, the bow

just an extension of her arms. Merida didn't notice when the crowd gathered to watch her, she didn't hear her mother actually applauding for the Princess who was unofficially the best archer in the kingdom. She was in her own little world for the time being, removed from awkward suitor conversations and the situations she found herself in. It was just her, her bow, and nothing else.

"No weapons eh, Elinor?" King Fergus chuckled, gently elbowing his wife's side and gesturing to the Lords and villagers who stood with their mouths agape (Dingwall being particularly purple). The Queen just smiled.

Soon her quiver was empty and, grasping for an arrow that she wasn't going to find, the princess' illusions faded. She was back in the real world, surrounded by people looking at her like she was some sort of exhibition - as if she were a dragon or something. Far be it from Merida to feel awkward in her own back yard, though. She just curtsied like her mother would want and excused herself. "Thank yeh," she smiled, calmly walking around the outside of the crowd, feeling like it was time to go check in on Hiccup. "I'll teach yeh some tomorrow, Finlay!"

"Och Fergus, she's off. _Again._ We throw her a party and-"

"And she's doin' her own thing like she always does. Ignore it, dear, n' enjoy yersel'! Yeh were a part of the story too, y'know."

The Queen's frown lessened. "I suppose."

Satisfied with the appearance she put in at the party, Merida felt at least a little weight lift off her shoulders as she entered the very empty castle. She slung her bow back over her shoulders and walked through the corridors, in less of a rush to get around than she usually was; the change of pace was nice and every so often, she'd stop to admire a tapestry or peer out a window, wandering towards the basement at what could almost be considered her leisure. The closer she got the quicker she became and soon Merida had arrived at the workshop. At the door, she took a moment to observe the viking boy: in the combined glow of red-hot coals and the shadows cast by candles, she could see his figure slumped over a desk, obviously sleeping, his floppy brown hair draped over the one cheek that was marked with lines where he'd been lying on paper. The princess allowed herself a smile. Had she been okay with the idea, she would have thought he looked almost _cute_.

Unfortunately she was casting a shadow of her own. Three, in fact. Each with it's own bundle of curly red hair.

There was a tug at her skirt and then everything happened far too quickly. Merida shrieked. Hiccup yelled, leaping from his chair and stumbling, sending tools and diagrams flying everywhere. The triplets gasped.

"Boys!" Merida half-hissed, half-screamed, sweeping her brothers into the room and shoving the heavy wooden door shut with a great thud, the kind she was going to regret later - but her heart was beating much too fast to care. The viking boy had scrambled up on the the desk, his back risen and arms splayed against the wall, staring at the three young boys who mimicked his own shock on the other side of the room. Hamish, Harris and Hubert suddenly leaped into action,

swirling around their sister's ankles and prodding at her, their silent voices crying out to know who the stranger was. "Uhh..." She uttered, her breath short and her blue eyes blown wide as she stared down at them. "Th-they look just like you! - why do they look just like you?!" Hiccup babbled, his prosthetic foot slipping on the wood and bringing him down to the floor. Merida ran to his side. "Oh my god!"

"Why do they look like you?!" Hiccup asked again, not for a second taking his eyes off the triplets.

Despite herself, Merida replied sharply. "Well they should, they're my brothers!"

Hiccup's eyes moved then, his head rapidly glancing back and forth at his friend and what he had just learned was her siblings. "You didn't tell me about them!" He exclaimed desperately, grabbing her forearm as she tried to help him back to his feet.

"Ah thought ah had!"

"Well you didnae- DIDN'T! Didn't! I mean didn't!"

Hamish, the obvious leader of the trio, ran to climb up onto a stool to get a better look at the boy. His little head tilted, then shot an inquisitive look at his sister. Merida knew them well enough to understand.

"YOU CANNOT TELL MUM." Merida barked, bending down to Hamish' eyeline. "Do you understand? You - cannot - tell - _anyone. Please._"

The triplets just grinned.

"_PLEASE._"

Little devils though they were, there was no-one in the world the triplets loved more than their sister. She was their idol. The three shared a look and a curt nod, silently deciding that there was nothing that they could get out of this; perhaps one day it would be a good blackmailing tool, but not now when she looked more desperate than they'd ever seen her. Not now. The boys all looked in Hiccup's direction, their quick movements oddly discomfoting and approached the viking boy, who wanted nothing more than to crawl back up onto the desk and away from them. But he realized that he loved Merida in his own way, too, and when he saw the sad, anxious look on her face, he decided that despite their obvious ability to sneak up on people, the triplets were worth befriending.

"Hello..."

15. Chapter 15

****Author's Note:**** I know this is a relatively short update, but I hope you like it anyway! Again, I'm still not able to update regularly; there's not change in the situation as of yet but I hope I'll be able to get more done soon: still, your favourites and reviews are always appreciated!

* * *

><p>It was one long staring contest: having just uttered his first and so far only word to the triplets - 'hello' - Hiccup was confronted by mostly silence: the redheaded boys just looked at the Viking like he had grown wings and started clucking like a chicken; Merida was wringing her hands desperately, her swishing hair becoming the sole source of any man-made sound as her head flitted to the boys, to Hiccup, to the door and back again. She hadn't been this anxious, well, ever. Harbouring an enemy (and his pet dragon) was way worse than turning her own mother into a bear, she knew, and here she was, entirely at the mercy of her little brothers. Restraint was not her strong point. Waiting for their approval was absolute agony. When the fire spat, the Princess couldn't swing her head back around fast enough, the sound of it crackling sent such a jolt through her already nervous body. But it was a good thing, because if it hadn't, she wouldn't have seen the princes raise one hand each and wave in unison. Merida's exhale came out like a gasp. Hamish, Harris and Hubert were waving at Hiccup. He had met their approval.

The Princess couldn't contain herself. She went off like a bomb, dancing a jig around the room before sweeping the triplets up into her arms and ruffling their hair affectionately, which of course, they weren't happy about. It was a family moment that Hiccup was definitely not a part of, but if his instincts about the triplets were right, he was happy just to watch, grinning and rubbing the back of his neck to try and relieve some of his built up tension. Though he wouldn't like to admit it, he was a little jealous - being an only child, Hiccup had never had to experience inner-sibling bribery or having a partner-in-crime. Even when he rounded up his fellow Viking teenagers to conquer the Red Death it hadn't felt like he was part of the group. He was the leader, the first Viking to ever ride a dragon, the son of the chief. But in DunBroch, and particularly with Merida, who had been completely unimpressed by him but in awe of Toothless, he finally felt like he was on even footing. The boy sighed. If he could have blended Berk and DunBroch (DunBerk, perhaps?), he would have done it in a heartbeat. Which got him to thinking. Merida on Berk. What would that be like?

Given time, Hiccup would have thought about it. But the Princess grabbed his arm, still bouncing ever-so-slightly, dragging him from the 'what-if' into the now. The physical contact was becoming more frequent, he noticed, and the thought of it made his cheeks and ears burn. The girl just grinned, completely oblivious to his thoughts. "You've been initiated, Hiccup! Accepted! Ach, ah knew they'd love yeh! Wait till they find out about Toothless!" Merida paused to laugh, though really, it was more of a cackle. The Viking boy choked. "What do you mean, find out about Toothless?!"

"Ahh, we cannae keep yeh hidden forever-" The Princess said and it was clear to Hiccup that what he thought was a good mood was actually her descent into madness. "-yeh'll have tae come out at some point. Ah mean honestly, it's no like I'm gonnae send yeh home and then never see yeh again, is it?"

The pair lapsed into silence, completely forgetting the princes as they faced an uncomfortable truth. So everything goes according to plan, Toothless' wing gets fixed, Hiccup's free to go home. And then what?

Merida stared at him, and though he'd turned his head away, she sought out every detail of his face. His hair. The shade of his green eyes. The smattering of freckles across his cheek. It occurred to her that, should he get away safely, that could very well be it for them - not that she realized that they had become a them, a we, an us - and it would definitely mean an end to the only true 'friend' she'd ever had. Merida couldn't stop herself. From his side, she threw her arms around Hiccup and laid her head against his.

"You're no goin' anywhere," she muttered with such finality that he almost believed it.

Hiccup looked at her from the corner of his eye. "But... I'll have to go... what about Toothless? And your parents? And Berk? And my dad?"

Not that he needed to worry about his dad. Flanked by Gobber and some of his most loyal men, Stoick the Vast was finally ready to take to the skies on the back of his own dragon. The search for his son was very much on. It hadn't been hard to rally a good group. Firstly, the truly loyal volunteered their service. Secondly, the chief had taken the liberty of reminding them about the search for the dragon's nest. Thirdly, only the truly stupid refused their leader anyway. But as they took off, the girl watching them from the hills went unnoticed. Astrid Hofferson was perched at the perfect vantage point, sitting on a rock and sharpening her favourite axe as she thought about what to do. They may not have been together, but she still cared for her ex-boyfriend a great deal; in fact, Astrid was pretty sure that they would end up together anyway. It was slim pickings, as far as mates were concerned: Snotlout had tried, but she only saw him as a friend and, unless there was something she didn't know, Hiccup and Ruffnut weren't exactly compatible. They were each other's only option, so it was pretty good that she loved him anyway.

The second the dragons and their riders had disappeared into the distance, Astrid tore her eyes away from the sky to glance down at her own sleeping steed who was curled around the rock on which the viking girl sat. Looking down at Stormfly, the girl finally acknowledged her inner thoughts: the search party would return fruitless, Hiccup was counting on her to bring him back, she was better off looking for him herself than just sitting and waiting for Odin's decision. No, her - and his - fate could change. She would make it. With her decision made, the girl tossed her axe up into the air once and caught it again with an assured smirk, waking her own dragon with a pat and taking to the air to round up a gang of her own.

16. Chapter 16

****Author's Note:**** Just a quick one for just now, but it's good to let you know that the story isn't dead! Genuinely though, I do wish I was able to write more; your continued support is awesome. Thank you so much!

* * *

><p>The trick to dealing with triplets, in Hiccup's observation, was to have known them all your life - that way you'd be absolutely prepared for any situation. However, if you barely knew them, or, say, were a complete stranger, then your best option was praying to

your God of choice because the chances are you would wake up with a stuffed bear head on your pillow or porridge down your pants. In the unfortunate case of Hiccup, he got both. "MOTHEROFODIN!" The viking cursed as the post-sleep fog cleared from his vision and he opened his eyes to see his new, beastly bed-mate, with its glassy black eyes and its very yellow fangs bared in a snarl. The boy scrambled out of his make-shift camp, hitting his head on the wood that kept him hidden under Merida's bed and suddenly very aware of the fact that he had, in fact, been sleeping on a bearskin rug. "It's back for revenge!" He choked out as, finally, he crawled to freedom and half-stumbled, half-stood, only to have cold, oaty sludge drip down his leg. He shrieked. The Princess woke.<p>

Merida's eyes flew open at the sound of Hiccup's scream, terrified that they'd been found out, only to see that it still fairly dark outside (around five-thirty in the morning, she guessed) and they were the only two people in her room. "Hiccup! Whit the heck are yeh playin' at?!" She hissed, throwing back the covers and making to get out of bed, only for her foot to find a large head of short, silky black fur. For a terrifying moment, she thought they were under attack and went to grab the sword from her bedside table, but then realised that, not only was it dead, it was probably a prank. "Aw alright, whit did they dae tae yeh?" Merida picked the bear-head trophy from the floor and laughed heartily, tossing her head around to see the viking's misfortune for herself. Hiccup glared at her. "This is not funny." He breathed, his pauses very short and his voice deadly serious. She almost stopped laughing. Then she saw the porridge that had slopped onto the floor. "Ohmahgod!" She cackled, laughing so hard that she fell to the floor too. The viking smirked. He wanted to be concerned - she did land with an awful thud - but she was still laughing and secretly, he hoped that her fall hurt. It wasn't fair that he got scared half to death and she got nothing.

Soon enough, the girl recovered and sat up so that, to him, she was just a floating head behind a mattress. "Alright," She said, the laughter dying down but the grin not quite gone, "Ah guess we're both awake now. Time to make use o' the mornin'."

"Excuse me? And just what, exactly, am I to do with _this?" _Hiccup replied, gesturing frantically at his body.

"Well yeh could stand teh gain some muscle, but you're not really the sort for tossin' cabers..."

"Oh ha-ha, Merida. Very funny. Now tell help me!"

"God, Hiccup. Just go wash off or somethin'." Merida stood up and dusted off her night-dress, which made Hiccup blush furiously. "I'm gonnæ put mah dress on, go feed Angus, n' _you_ can finish yer dragon's wing. Castle's usually as dead as... well, this thing," She paused, wiggling the bear head about in the air, "around this time o' the mornin'. Even _Mum_ _doesnae_ get up this early. That is, if yeh havenæ woken her wi' yer wee girly screamin'."

"My screaming isn't girly, thank you very much." Hiccup retorted, dramatically clearing his throat and pounding his chest as if to reassert his manliness. Merida rolled her eyes and sceptically scanned his body up-and-down.

"Aye, well then. Go clean up n' I'll meet yeh back here. Yeh know where the washroom is."

She was right, of course, when she had said the castle would be empty. Hiccup made it to the washroom and back without so much as a whisper of life around him. It was eerie. All he had known of DunBroch was what came after him waking up: the castle, much like the village of Berk, was always full of hustle and bustle and to go from festival-proportion loudness to extremely early morning silence was somewhat jarring. The best case scenario for castle emptiness would be that everyone else was outside and as loud as ever, so that he and the Princess could have the place to themselves and go exploring (castles weren't exactly common where he came from). Of course, it was not that he wanted to be alone with her for any particular reason. The time they did spend together already was always in the company of those who did not speak.

Merida was waiting for him outside her door, full quiver slung over her back and looking very much like she was ready to face the day, which was pretty much the opposite of how Hiccup looked. His clothes were wet, bedraggled and messy; he wanted nothing more than to go back to bed and sleep for about one hundred years. "Of all the people in DunBroch, you had to be a morning person." He groaned. The redhead grinned, but it faltered upon seeing that he really wasn't ready, that he was shivering with the cold. Her grin turned to a frown and she disappeared into her room, reappearing as quickly as she left, this time with a pile of coarse black wool in her hands. Hiccup raised an eyebrow. Merida let the wool hang loose and draped it around his shoulders: she'd given him her favourite cloak. "Yeh must be freezin'," she muttered, fiddling with the clasp at the front. "Maybe there's some spare clothes down the stair, but..."

"I'm okay, really," Hiccup blurted, taken aback by this sudden act of thoughtfulness, even more so when she hugged him tight, but he really wasn't prepared for what she said next.

"Boys mah-our-age, are usually pains in the arse. Not that you aren't a pain in the arse. But you're a pain in the arse I actually like."

That one comment was enough to make him smile throughout the day. When they had breakfast, he was still smiling. When they went to feed their respective pets, he was still smiling. When she'd left him alone in the workshop to finish Toothless' false wing, he had finally finished it with a grin the size of all DunBroch. But if he had known what Astrid was up to, he wouldn't have been smiling at all.

The blonde teenager had rallied her viking friends in a search party for Berk's lost son, and their first port-of-call was the place Hiccup had lost his leg: the dragon's nest, the setting for his battle with the massive beast that had come to be known as 'The Red Death'. The island itself wasn't bad though. In fact, it had turned into a dragon paradise since The Red Death's defeat, and when the gang came to shore, no dragon stopped going about it's business or seemed threatened by the presence of humans. They were friendly and calm, content just to let the teenagers go about their business.

"Well, here we are," Astrid said, flicking a strand of hair out of

her face defiantly. "Ruff, Tuff, Barf, Belch. Go up high. Swoop around the cliffs, see what you can find. Snotlout, Fishlegs, you search the ground. Don't disturb the dragons, just be careful. I'm going to search in the cave. Remember to keep an eye out for Toothless as well as Hiccup. Go!"

"She said my name first, that means I'm in charge!" Ruffnut barked at her twin brother as they ran towards their dragon.

"Uhh, Astrid?"

The girl turned to face Snotlout with a look of considerable contempt. They were good friends, but his advances towards her got on her nerves at the best of times, and now, with her sort-of boyfriend gone, Astrid's patience was spread thinner than ever. But axe-throwing wasn't her only skill. She was also an excellent diplomat, a born leader without actually being born to lead.

"Yes?" She said calmly, watching the bulky black-haired boy play with his hands and generally try his best to look casual, concerned, and as always, very punchable.

"Well, uh, listen. I'm not saying you're not totally, y'know, awesome enough to go storming in there alone, but perhaps, if you want, I can search the cave with you. I mean like, it's dark in there. And what if there's another monster, Astrid? I'm totally just looking out for you, and what's best for you, and helping you find Hiccup and whatever."

"What about Fishlegs?"

"It's really cool listening to him going on about-" Snot paused to snort, "y'know, firepower and attack points and stuff. But let's get real, babe. There might actually be something in there, and I just thought you'd need back up. Hey, sorry for being concerned.

"No, no. You're absolutely right, Snot! I do need back up..."

Snotlout looked like a dog with a bone, the same look he always got when Astrid said something positive towards him.

"Fishlegs!" She yelled. "You come with me!"

"Aw, what?!"

"You yourself just said he knows a lot about attack and everything. Great back up, don't you think?" She smiled prettily, trying to contain her amusement.

"Well, yeah, but-"

"Get going, Snot. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

17. Chapter 17

****Author's Note:**** Hello again! I'm back with another chapter that I hope is worth the wait. I know I say this with every update but honestly, it's just lovely that you're still reading and supporting

my story, so thank you so much and please, if you can, leave me a review because I just love reading your comments!

* * *

><p>The initial search came up empty: having spent the best part of the day teetering on cliffs, searching dark caves and earning some seriously brag-worthy scorch marks, the viking teenagers reconvened on the beach to share their findings - nothing. There wasn't a sign of Hiccup, no clue that he, or any human, had touched the land since the defeat of the Red Death. Astrid's usual composure faltered and she kicked the pebble shore, sending a cluster of small rocks into the air and cursing so badly that even the Twins were shocked. But she flicked her blonde hair out of her face and gritted her teeth. "We move on."<p>

"Uhh, Astrid...?" Snotlout muttered.

"If I hear you 'uhh' one more time, I swear to Odin..." She muttered inaudibly, her hand grasping the hilt of her axe. "What?"

The black-haired boy thrust one meaty arm towards the sky and the group's chattering fell immediately silent. Above them the sky was filled with low-rolling clouds, the kind that threatened of an incoming storm and looked like thrashing waves over a murky, merciless grey sea. The weather wasn't the problem though - to the most seasoned Viking, all that meant was Thor having a hissy fit - the problem was the large shadow which moved swiftly through the gloom above, getting ever darker as it began it's descent towards the island. "It's just a dragon," Astrid murmured, doubt creeping into her voice. The creature, or whatever it was, was much too big to be anything like the dragons they knew. "What... do we do now?" Ruffnut asked quietly and all eyes fell on the leader of the search party. "Get to your dragons," Astrid replied faintly. "If we don't have time to get out, at least we'll stand a chance in a fight." Everyone scattered on her command and sought out their scaly steeds, and soon they were all airborne, but it was too late.

"I cannae believe we didn't think to look here first!" A familiar voice called. The kids sighed audibly, grinning at one other and laughing as they realized that the shadow wasn't a large beast, but in fact a whole fleet of dragons and the voice they heard was just Gobber. Chief Stoick was, of course, the first to land, his face pale and grim but more determined than ever. At the sight of the kids, his expression softened momentarily, but soon enough he came to his senses. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing you are," Astrid replied, her voice authoritative even in the presence of her Chief. "Looking for Hiccup."

"You weren't supposed to know about the search, much less launch your own," he grunted back, dismounting off his dragon and standing in front of her with his arms crossed, visibly disgruntled but, as far as she could tell, not too angry; Stoick tried to look intimidating but there was a twinkle in his eye, like he was proud of them for taking the initiative.

"And I'm just supposed to ignore the fact he's gone?"

"I'm willing to bet that you're the only one that noticed." Stoick

snorted, gesturing at the other teenagers who were now mingling with the older search party, chatting and laughing with a few hugs for good measure, as if they were simply having a day out and not, in fact, doing a serious search for Berk's missing son.

"Well, I had to look for myself," Astrid grunted. "But that didn't mean I had to be alone."

The Chief regarded her for a moment, thinking about her relationship with Hiccup, and with a wry, crooked smile, silently approved of his son's choice. She was just as smart and as stubborn as Hiccup was, with all of the fire and grit needed to lead a village (and keep a wandering boy in check). "Well alright then. But we've lost one already and we are not losing another."

The lost one, as it was, was perfectly content with being lost. It was the afternoon in DunBroch, and having just finished the false tail wing for Toothless, Merida and Hiccup had gone to the tower where the dragon was hiding, waiting for a test drive. Just like always, Toothless pounced the second he saw Hiccup appear through the trapdoor. "Oof! C'mon, bud. Get up. Get off. There ya go," Hiccup muttered, still trying to remain cool in front of the redheaded princess, but he was as overjoyed as he'd ever been to see his best friend. "Hey, Toothy," grinned Merida, patting the dragon on the head. She'd gotten somewhat attached to the big scaly creature, and had forged a friendship with him over the course of the five days that they'd been there. But with the wing finished, it seemed that their adventure was coming to an end. She frowned, watching as Hiccup clipped the brace around Toothless' tail. The dragon's bright chartreuse eyes widened. Freedom came rushing back into his body and instinctively, his wings stretched out.

"Woah! Yeh cannae do that now, do yeh what would happen if anyone saw-"

The dragon wasn't listening. He just butted Hiccup's side, causing the Viking boy to fall onto his back and they took off, making sure to fly down the castle's side and out of eyesight, but soon he was soaring, high up in the clouds like they were nothing but birds. Merida gasped and laughed, vaguely acknowledging that it was dangerous for them all, but she was too in awe to care: up in the sky, there was a real live dragon, its freedom regained, a brilliant boy on it's back. It was a moment of joy, but soon their silhouette became smaller and smaller and Merida's heart sunk. 'What if they're not coming back?' She wondered. Life before Hiccup and Toothless had been boring enough, but now that she knew what (and who) was out there, the idea of going back and pretending nothing ever happened filled her heart with dread. She slowly turned back towards the trapdoor, fairly convinced it was all over. 'Well that's that, then.' She sniffed, angrily rubbing her face with the sleeve of her favourite wool dress.

"Hey! Where you going?" Hiccup half-yelled and Merida instinctively ran towards the voice, grabbing the edge of the tower with a lurch and grinning widely as she saw two pairs of green eyes stare back at her. "Yeh idiot! I-I thought... you just disappeared!" She reached her hand over and playfully punched the boy's shoulder, which of course meant that she'd misjudged her strength and it actually hurt, but Hiccup just grinned back. "Dinnae scare me like that!"

"Scare you?"

"Yeah! I thought yeh werenae..." Merida faltered.

"...coming back?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah."

Hiccup paused for a moment. She looked genuinely upset at the thought of never seeing them again and that made his heart swell, so he carefully measured what to say next. "Why? Don't you want a dragon ride?"

The princess' eyes widened immediately and he smiled again, noting how, much like DunBroch itself, her emotions changed within the blink of an eye: where there had been snow on the ground just a few days ago there was now the haze of early spring sunshine, and where she had been sad, it evaporated immediately at the very idea of flying. She was bouncing on the spot with excitement. "Yeh're kiddin' me! Can I?"

"Well, that's not really up to me. What do you say, bud?" The boy said, tilting his head to meet the dragon's eye, and he could swear that Toothless was smiling too, almost mockingly, like it was just nice to be asked by a girl instead of having to threaten them. Toothless bobbed his head once and his consent given, the pair rose slightly to give the Princess a better chance of getting on. Her lack of fear was somewhat astounding: the redhead climbed on to the stones of the tower edge and waited for the opportune moment, springing like a cat and landing neatly on the dragon's back. Hiccup stared. "...You sure you haven't done this before?"

She smirked and shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Horse, dragon - what's the difference?"

What surprised them both was how easy it was for them to become comfortable; Merida wound her hands around Hiccup's waist without a second thought, leaning her chin on his shoulder, both perfectly content and yet, restless, the fire in her eyes burning brighter than ever with anticipation. The boy smiled nervously, his own green eyes wide for an entirely different reason, and Toothless set off, winding low at first to stay out of trouble but soon, they broke into the open air, leaving their troubles far behind. Below them, the world opened into fields and hills of emerald green and above, the sky was fading through blue, orange and salmon pink, the clouds turning the colour of cream. Hiccup's could have sworn he had seen what looked like a trail of tiny blue balls of fire, winding a trail through the forests, but he couldn't be sure. Merida's red curls swirled around his face and higher, but she had lapsed into an awed silence, every now and then breathing a contented sigh. Toothless suddenly dipped low as they approached a loch, skimming his toes against the water and sending a spray up at his riders. They both laughed and it seemed the Princess was awake again. One arm lazily dropped from the boy's waist as she leaned over the dragon's side, close enough that she could see the salmon scurry away as she traced a line across the loch's surface. If it had been joy watching them fly, it was close to perfection being with them.

"I can see everything," she breathed finally. "This... the whole kingdom. It's beautiful. Thank you."

"Uhh... you're welcome?"

"Ah'm glad ah shot yeh," Merida added with a playful nudge, and she threw back her head, letting out a whoop of joy. Hiccup joined in, and so did Toothless, letting out a blast of energy that incinerated the air.

"WOAH!" The girl cried. "Did-did you just...?"

"-Toothless!-"

"-that. was. AMAZING! Do it again, do it again!"

Both Hiccup and Toothless were stunned, but the dragon complied, again releasing a blast of power that shot out into the air and resonated over the water. Merida's jaw dropped. "Wow."

"Dragons, right?" Hiccup said nervously.

"I wish Angus could do that!" The Princess cackled, tossing her head back wildly. "Amazing!"

They flew for about an hour and a half after that, adventuring across the land until the inky blue leaked into their perfect evening sky and it was time to take the girl home. Toothless navigated flawlessly through the darkened night and took them back to the castle, hovering in front of their tower as he waited for the Princess to dismount. She turned, legs dangling over the side of Toothless' great black body, but hesitated, looking down at her home, looking out across the horizon and then finally at Hiccup, whose eyebrows knitted together in concern. "So... what are you waiting for...?"

She frowned. "If I get off, who's tae say you won't go flying away and ah'll never see you again?"

The pair fell silent for a matter of moments, considering the time they'd spent together and the fact that he couldn't stay forever. Logic didn't seem to matter and though it was irrational, Hiccup made a dodgy slip down to the castle's roof, turning to look up at Merida and offering her his hand. She didn't need it, but was unusually touched by the gentlemanly gesture and took it, slipping her own small hand into his work-calloused fingers and leaped down beside him. "So...?"

"So I'm not ready to go back. So I don't want to leave. So we're not going anywhere."

18. Chapter 18

****Author's Note:**** So a review I got for this chapter made me reconsider the original incident; honestly I can justify the actions she took in the original chapter (and I have hinted at it) but it made me think, so I changed it! Thank you for bringing that to my attention - see, your reviews do make a difference and I love reading them!

* * *

><p>The teenagers left Toothless safely tucked into 'bed' - which consisted mainly of a pile of hay that Merida smuggled from the stables - and made their way down the stairs, being mindful that the hatch-door was firmly shut. They squeezed past the crack in the stone wall and out into the corridor where they were met by a wall of noise. "When is this festival going to end?" Merida groaned as she and Hiccup stood to listen. It was the usual ruckus, with flaring bagpipes and an infectious tempo carried straight from the main hall, but with a slight difference that the Princess wouldn't notice until much later: she could hear the lords belting out a tuneless song and if there was a song to be sung, King Fergus was usually the first one to open his mouth and was certainly the last one to stop. But his distinctive, raspy growl wasn't smothering the sound of anyone else like it usually did. Adrenaline from the flight still pulsed through Merida's veins and she'd lost her usual focus. Instead of caution, she took Hiccup's hands and started to swing them both around in circles, dancing away down the passage as they set a course for her bedroom. Laughter bounced from wall to wall, and even though the boy felt uneasy, she was much too infectious and soon, his laughter joined hers. Hiccup had officially given into her reckless abandon.<p>

"Where is that lassie?" King Fergus grunted as he hobbled through the halls, the Queen following quickly at his back.

"Come on dear," she said softly, as if trying to calm him. "We know what she's like."

"Aye well, ah'm the first tae tell yeh that. But this isnae right! You put a _lot_ of effort into this daft wee shindig. We threw this for her, wanted to show her that our respect still stands. The least she could do is _bloody well show up!_"

"Oh, Fergus..."

He stopped dead and craned his neck out, sticking his nose up in the air and tweaking his ear. Elinor was inwardly amused by how strange he looked, but she'd learned not to question his instinct - he was the Bear King, after all. And now, she was the Bear Queen. "Quickly." He said, taking her by the hand and the pair went scurrying off down the hallway, to be confronted by a sight that neither of them expected. Fergus spluttered. Elinor's delicate hands quickly clasped to her mouth and she shook her head in disbelief. They'd stopped at the very end of the hall, which faced yet another passageway in the maze they called home, and in the entrance to that, Merida was dancing with a boy they'd never seen before.

"WHAT IS THIS?!" The King bellowed, the sound of it resonating throughout the castle so loudly that all the action in the main hall stopped instantly and the castle fell silent, as if the walls themselves were now holding their breath. Only the fire of the torches and the wild, short-of-breath huffs from Fergus' nose could be heard.

Hiccup's heart had stopped, he was sure of it. They'd been caught, and here, in the flesh, Merida's father was more intimidating than ever: he was taller than Chief Stoick and slightly more broad, with meaty hands that looked like they could crush mountains and level forests; he had only one leg, much like Hiccup himself, but with only

a well-carved wooden stump for a foot and to finish the image, a bear skin slung over his back like he might have ripped it clean off the beast's body merely seconds ago. The only thing keeping the Viking boy anchored to the Earth was the fact that, even though she'd whirled around at the sound of her father's voice, one of Merida's hands was still interlocked with his own.

As far as he was concerned, it could have been minutes, or hours, or _days,_ until someone spoke again, but the effect of it was so devastating that neither he nor Merida would be able to forget it for as long as they'd live:

"Oh, _Merida,_" Queen Elinor breathed through her fingers, a whisper of wind that cracked and shattered with the sound of disappointment. Fergus' head flicked towards his wife for a split second and the damage was done. At the sight of his Queen in tears, Fergus' chest started to rise and fall with the motions of heavy breathing and his nostrils flared, his usually bright blue eyes now grey like a thundercloud, colder and more unforgiving than Merida had ever seen them. The Lords, their sons and a crowd of people had gathered at the back of the King and Queen having dutifully followed Fergus' cry and were now also staring at the teenagers in shock. A thousand eyes bore down upon them. The Bear King let out another mighty bellow and lunged, a hand that was almost twice the size of Hiccup's head clamping around the boy's thin arm. Hiccup broke his own silence and yelped in surprise, being dragged away from the girl who had changed his life forever.

The way the King was holding Hiccup, the Viking could see everything behind them unfold. He was aware of the crowd lumbering after them. He knew that the Queen was walking slowly somewhere far behind, hands still delicately covering her mouth as she wept. But he did not tear his eyes away from Merida. She was running after them. For every three steps that she took, the King took one long stride. Tears were streaming down her face. Her nose and cheeks had gone bright pink. It was the most heartbreaking thing he'd seen in his whole life.

"Dad, no!" She cried, her hair thrashing around her shoulders like it was alive. One pale hand reached out for him. Hiccup gulped. He called her name. He reached out for her in return.

Thud, thud, thud came the sound of the boy's body being dragged down the stairs that sat to the left of the main hall and soon they entered the family's private dining area, where the King used his free hand to throw a dining chair against the wall and dumped Hiccup into it, immediately raising his hand to the boy's throat. Merida let out a sickening sound like a choked wail, sprinting around the side where she tried to get to him. Fergus raised an arm and she collided into it, stumbling back but being caught by Ian MacGuffin, the ex-boyfriend who looked down towards her with pity. Fergus looked over his shoulder towards the strong lad and snarled: 'Hold her. I'll deal wi' her later,' before turning back and staring into the terrified boy's eyes, a look with so much ice that Hiccup could swear he could feel his heart freezing.

"Who are you?" The King growled. Hiccup blustered. "I-I-I..."

"I said _WHO ARE YOU?_"

"His name is Hiccup!" Merida screeched from behind them. She had

slipped from Ian's grasp and elbowed him in the gut with such ferocity that he collapsed, and thanking the gods, realised her bow was slung over her shoulder; grasping for the quiver over her back, she notched an arrow and steeled her breath, watching the arrow fly just inches from the King's face. He howled and stumbled back and she shot another one so close it bristled through the hairs in his beard. She frowned as it got close, realizing she would hurt him if that's what it took to free Hiccup: her father was acting like a beast, unreasonable and unreachable, a bully. True bravery, she realized, a knot forming in her stomach, came from standing up for what you believed in - even if the one in the wrong was someone you love. The King stared at her in shock. The Princess shot Hiccup a look so quick he almost missed it, but the intention was clear. In her wild eyes, there was only one word: run. He did. Hiccup launched himself from the chair, weaving through the stunned people with a constant shout of 'ahh!' and praying to Odin that his bad foot could carry him.

"Merida!" Fergus screamed.

The Princess looked at her beloved father for one sad moment. "You'll forgive me later," she said, voice hoarse, unsure and cracking with sadness, but she swung the stolen sword threateningly and followed Hiccup. She burst into the corridors of the castle where she followed the sound of metal clacking hurriedly against the stone floor to find Hiccup and it was obvious that he was flagging, but he looked more determined than she'd ever seen him. Admiration for him stronger than it had ever been, she took his hand and with a silent agreement, he sped up and together, they made it out of the castle to find Angus waiting. "Oh," the redhead girl sighed, watching the Clydesdale horse trotting back and forth with anxiety. He whinnied impatiently but had come for her, just like he always did.

Hiccup scrambled up onto the horse's back with Merida's help and waited for her to mount. But she didn't. She patted Angus briefly on the neck and gave her steed a look that reminded the viking boy of how he looked at Toothless. A look that wasn't a command from an owner to a horse, but a look that spoke a language only she and Angus could understand, a look from one best friend to the other. The Princess said, tearing her gaze away from Angus' face and instead looking up at the Viking boy she had come to care about so much that she'd protect from anyone. Her frown twisted into a sad, bitter smile. "Go."

Obedying her like always, Angus tore away from the castle, over the bridge and into the forest, leaving Hiccup to watch helplessly as the last red curl of hair faded into the distance.

19. Chapter 19

Merida couldn't help but wonder if it had been hard for Hiccup to watch her stay behind, because it was hard for her to let him go; for now, it was simply in his best interest if they weren't together. The Princess knew that one he'd caught onto something, her father was like a dog with a rat between it's teeth, he'd bite down, hold on and never let go. When he'd inevitably go looking, he'd be thinking that they would be in a pair and, if she was honest, she was easier to find than Hiccup was. All green and brown and skinny, Hiccup could practically melt into the forest. If he threw himself on the ground

and stayed very still, he'd be nothing more than a twig. Plus, she didn't have to worry about the Viking boy navigating the forest all on his own. No-one knew the land like Merida and Angus did; animal or not, the horse was more than capable of providing safety, shelter and defense for the boy. On her word, Angus would protect Hiccup with his life, and for that she was most grateful. But what she could say for her steed, she could not say for Hiccup's.

The redhead had rounded the side of the castle, running at top speed and skidding to a halt when she came to the tower on top of which his restless dragon rested. She could see the long, tapering black tail of the beast hanging over the castle's edge, flicking back and forth against the weathered stones like a pendulum but only because she was looking for it. Against the midnight sky, Toothless was nothing but a shadow. Calling the dragon would cause him to come, she was sure of it, but making too much noise would lead the King and his half-drunken army to find her and worse, _him_. The Princess cursed, stomping along the pine needle-covered ground in a circle, her beloved quiver thumping against her back as she swung around. It hit her back again and like a bolt of lightning, she was struck with an idea that recalled a memory - Merida was the first person in centuries to climb the Fire Falls. Only ancient Kings were said to be brave enough to drink the 'fire', so that certainly made her the first female to do it, too. Unlike the Fire Falls, the castle wall was much too flat to find a handhold, but even in the dark she could see the minute cracks in the stone; a devilish smile curled across her lips and she took arrow after arrow from the quiver, notching them onto her bow and using her well-developed senses to make sure every one landed in a crack in the wall.

Merida stood back to admire her handiwork. In the starlight, the effect of her keen shooting was perfectly clear: every arrow had hit a crevice, forming a web of leverage that she could use to haul herself up. She wasn't exactly 'light', but she was strong and quick, making easy work of climbing up towards the tower's edge. There was a moment when her foot had slipped off an arrow and caused it to fall to the ground (almost taking her with it), and Merida's heart had leaped into her throat, but she took a deep breath and swallowed it back down. Hiccup needed her. He was the most important thing. It was madness, of course: she'd only known him for a short period of time but she was pretty sure that, outside family, Hiccup was the best person she'd ever met. Strong (though not in the physical sense), brave, gentle and daft, the image of his goofy smile and the memory of holding him as they flew was enough to send the determination coursing back through her veins. '_For Hiccup,'_ Merida thought, gritting her teeth as she hauled herself over the tower and onto a pile of hay.

The dragon's head whipped up instantly, chartreuse eyes narrowed and glowing, his black lips pulled back in a snarl. He realized who it was and, much to her relief, visibly relaxed - and tensed up again just as quickly when he realized that Hiccup wasn't there. Toothless growled. Merida gulped. She'd only been with him alone once before, and that was because she'd shot through his fake tail wing. "Uhh..." she muttered. But Toothless wasn't paying attention, his head was now pointed away from her, staring down at the path that led away from the castle, which was now illuminated by firelight. It was a search party, with King Fergus leading the pack on horseback, flanked by the Lords and with a swarm of torch-carrying, weapon-wielding men in tow. Toothless glanced back at Merida, and the floodgates within the girl

broke. She flung her arms out and flailed, before bringing her hands to her face, desperately attempting to cover the tears that streamed down her cheeks. "They found Hiccup!"

Suddenly, a large weight butted her in the stomach. She opened her eyes. Toothless had pressed his head to her torso, eyes closed in silent acknowledgement, like he was sad, like he was trying to comfort her. The thought of it twisted Merida's gut. She did what her instincts told her to do - she crumpled to the ground and threw her arms around Toothless' neck, nuzzling in like he was Angus. The only difference between the two was that where there was usually fur, there was now scales. For a moment they sat together, the dragon's large body curling a large, onyx shield around her and he held his head against hers. Toothless liked Merida. She was unafraid, she brought him fish but best of all, she clearly cared for Hiccup and in Toothless' eyes, that made her just about the best girl in the world. But time was wasting. He used his hind leg to bump her again, and when she looked up, her intent was clear.

"Can I fly you?" Merida whispered, stroking the dragon's head. "Yeh... you can find him better than I ever could. Please. _Please._"

Toothless grunted his consent. The Princess smiled wryly.

"So... just how do I do that?" She asked, standing up to walk along the length of the night fury's body and using a finger to trail along the delicate rigging of Hiccup's design. Toothless rolled his eyes and much like he'd tripped Hiccup onto his back before, he flicked his tail and sent the girl stumbling.

"Oh _that was nice._" The Princess adjusted herself, settling into the saddle on the dragon's back, trying to figure out how it all worked; the dragon was not prepared to wait. Toothless spread his wings out wide and as always, Merida was left stunned by the sheer length of them, but she couldn't stop to admire them because he'd launched into the sky without warning. It was all she could do to shove her feet into the the stirrups and hold on tight. For one beautiful moment, they soared high and Merida's breath was stolen away by the wind: it was just Merida, Toothless, and the endless expanse of stars that pierced the black and blue velvet night. But then it all changed. Toothless' body spun and suddenly they were locked in a deadly freefall. She screamed. He barked at her. She desperately tried to remember what Hiccup told her about the harness system, flicking her feet back and forth in the stirrups until - _click! _Toothless' wing position changed. They leveled out just before he hit the ground.

Merida screamed and Toothless barked his surprise, happy that she'd figured it out and soon, they were soaring slowly over the forest, watching the orange glow of the search party flicker throughout the interspersed branches. Her heart thundered from the exhilaration, from the tension, from the anticipation. But Merida's eyes were blown wide, watching for any sign, any clue that Hiccup was out there - until she realized the the unnatural glow from the forest wasn't all orange. Through the trees wound a tiny, bright blue trail of fire and even from their distance, she thought she could hear the whispers. Low, soft, gentle, tempting.

"Wisps," the princess breathed. Her instinct kicked in. Merida

pressed her legs into the dragon's sides, willing for him to dip left and follow the trail; Toothless didn't want to comply. He wanted to follow the search party. He wanted to make sure they got to Hiccup first. He hissed and struggled against her direction, but she swung her head down to catch his eye. "You can see them too, ah know yeh can. We need to follow them. They'll lead us to... whatever we need to be led to. Please?" If dragons could sigh, Toothless did. But he rolled to the side and on his direction, Merida changed the tail wing's position, the mismatched pair dipping so low to the forest that Merida's skirt skimmed the treetops. A clearing came into view and the dragon made a swift landing, a whole trail of wisps expanding a seemingly endless route to their fate into the forest. Toothless didn't trust the little blue bulbs, he didn't like the sound of them. He snapped his jaws at one, jumping from wisp-to-wisp and snapping his mouth around them.

"Toothless, no!" Merida quietly cried, wary of both scaring the wisps and alerting the world to their position. She leaped down from his back and ran around in front of him, finding herself scared of the dragon for the second time that evening; his eyes were dilated wildly and his mouth was open in a growl, his head darting from place to place as he tried to get around her and consume the wisps - they wouldn't tempt her again. "Toothless!" She yelled louder and he stopped, tearing his eyes away from the blue lights and tilting his head, giving her an almost-innocent, 'who, me?' kind of look that reminded the Princess of her father's dogs. She patted his head but held her voice firm. "This is fate," the girl said. "Ah jus' know it."

20. Chapter 20

****Author's Note:**** Time for the usual message - your reviews and support for this story put a smile on my face each and every day and as always, thank you so much!******
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* * *

><p>It was an agonizing walk. Toothless groaned and grunted like a petulant child, every now and again butting his head against Merida's legs as if to say, 'are we there yet?' She didn't mind but wasn't really paying any attention, just patting him on the head and continuing to follow the wisps like she was in a trance. The vacant expression on her face scaring the dragon, but he followed her dutifully, finding comfort in the knowledge that if she were to come into any trouble, he'd be there and that really, Hiccup was her main concern. The pair climbed up a hill, weaving through the trees and ducking under branches until they came to a place Merida was all too aware of: a ring of stones loomed high above them and an unfamiliar smell hung in the air which, to any observant mammal, smelled just like magic; Toothless shuddered, lips curling back. Danger. On the opposite side of the stones, the trail of wisps continued and so did Merida, walking through the ring without fear. She didn't know whether she was happy to see the wisps again or not, but there was no denying fate; Toothless didn't care for fate and hesitated outside the stone ring, just like Angus once had. Animals were much more aware of magic than humans and it seemed like the ring of stones was protected by a magical aura that prevented them from getting too close - every instinct told the dragon no, every nerve in his body on

fire. Merida noticed the absence by her side and turned, their eyes meeting. "Come on, yeh dafty," she whispered softly, trying to soothe him. The fearful look in his eyes didn't sit well with her but what choice did she have? Wisps didn't just occur randomly. She had to believe that something was trying to send them a message or trying to guide them. "Time's no for wastin'." Toothless skittered around for a moment, unsure, but he passed through the invisible barricade and caught up with a quick nuzzle to her side. She giggled despite herself and pressed in close. "Thank you."<p>

Time trickled by slowly and the twenty minute trail seemed like it took days, but eventually the last wisp evaporated and left the pair standing at the the edge of another clearing, a place they were both familiar with: the open space that stretched out in front of them was ringed with trees and sat next to the stream that lead to the salmon run; the ground was still scorched from where the foursome had sat around the fire, and overall, looked untouched since they'd last been there. It was a spot that Merida and Angus favoured on their travels due to it's beauty and secrecy, but the redhead was not glad to see it. In fact, she wasn't really paying attention at all, for at the edge of the water laid a body, a streak of green with tangled limbs and messy brown hair.

Merida clapped her hands to her mouth, much like her mother did. "_Hiccup."_

The princess tried to run to his side but her legs had turned to stone and she was unable to move - she couldn't see where the boy was injured, or if he was injured at all; she couldn't see if his eyes were open; she couldn't see if he was even _breathing. _Her heart felt far too heavy for her chest. Angus had come to her side and was stomping around her impatiently, anxious for the boy who'd been in his charge, but the horse went unnoticed to the Princess' eye. She stood still, her hands clamped firmly across her lips as if trying to keep her heart from escaping. Like a tree, the girl's imaginary roots dug deep into the ground and she could have stood there for a thousand years.

Toothless had stood by her side in shock for a moment, but wasn't the type to stay still: the dragon pounced on the boy with such haste that both he and they boy's unconscious form tumbled a little closer to the water's edge. Toothless' tongue flicked impatiently back and forth across his lips as he peered down, waiting for Hiccup to wake up and greet him. Moments passed. Nothing happened. Toothless barked unhappily and the sound sent a shockwave through Merida's body and she blinked rapidly, trying to wake herself up; the Princess' emotional floodgates broke open once again and she stumbled forward, crumpling to the ground by the dragon's side. She couldn't see Hiccup for Toothless' body, but wanted to be near him nonetheless. More moments passed, Toothless' tail lashing about like a pendulum again, but this time it felt like he really was counting down the seconds; all three of them sat silently and waited simply because they didn't know what else to do.

A timid voice struggled out from beneath the dragon's body. "Hey, bud," Hiccup groaned softly. "Nice to see you too- ow. Ow ow ow. Okay, you're crushing me now!" Merida couldn't believe her ears. She laughed and clapped and bounced up and down, so happy that not only was the boy okay, he was still as daft as ever. The princess playfully shoved Toothless' head away so she could get a good look at

Hiccup. Her hair fell in a curtain around them both and their eyes met. "Merida," he breathed dozily.

"Aye," She smiled tearily. "Who were you expectin', like?"

In his haze and before he could stop himself, the boy reached up and brushed a stray curl from her face, clearing his view of her eyes: they were bright, beautiful and brimming with tears. Merida was taken aback by the delicate gesture but he didn't notice. "I... as if I wanted to see anyone else." Hiccup joked, his smile crooked. His eyes fluttered slightly until he awoke to the world and truly saw the girl sitting over him, the sight of her like a bolt of lightning charging throughout his body. He scrambled up into a sitting position, clearing his throat awkwardly and trying to look at anything but Merida's face.

She laughed. "So glad yer back, Hiccup."

Her joy was short lived. Blood trickled from a cut on the boy's forehead, weaving a scarlet trail down his face; Hiccup had flinched when he moved his leg.

"Yer hurt," Merida said, shuffling forward - the Viking boy wanted to move further back, both the events of the night and the concern for proper protocol making him wary of being close to her, even though that's all he really wanted to be, _close _- but moving even an inch would have seen him dunked into the cold water of the creek. Scotland's weather was temperamental, to say the least, and it reminded him so much of Berk; just a few days ago, there had been a reprieve of warm spring sunshine but now it was back to being, well, _cold._ It was like what ever god controlled the weather here couldn't decide which season it was. There was no way he was going into the creek, so Hiccup just had to grin and bear it when the princess got close enough to swipe a delicate finger across the gash on his head. Merida grunted and suddenly, she was sort of sprawled over him, hands dipped into the stream. "W-What are you doing?!"

"Aw hush, yeh big bairn," Merida grunted, pulling herself back up. In one hand she held a small pool of water and with her free hand, she cleaned the wound - he winced as she touched it, causing the Princess to frown. "Ah know it hurts," she murmured. She didn't want to hurt him, but the sight of the blood upset her.

"I don't even know what happened," Hiccup said, wincing again but inwardly enjoying her gentle touch. "I think I fell. And hit the rock?"

"Well did yeh say sorry?"

"Huh?"

"The rock didnae do anythin' tae you," Merida said, her face deadpan. "There wis no reason to hit it, so I hope yeh apologized."

Hiccup stared.

The corners of Merida's lips perked up. "I _am_ jokin', yeh know." Visibly relaxed, Hiccup was thinking that even though he was the one to hit his head, she was the one with brain damage. "Oh, oh, okay." He looked at Toothless, who was grinning toothlessly - the dragon

butted his head into Hiccup's torso and the Viking hugged the animal in return. "Really is nice to see you, bud," He said with a wry smile. "Thought I might never see you again..."

Merida looked away from the boy's forehead and into his eyes, more serious than he'd ever seen her. Fire burned blue in her eyes and the ferocity behind her even expression scared him a little - she was always doing that, scaring him or making him nervous. Astrid had been pretty much the same, but Astrid was intimidating for the sake of being intimidating. A true Viking woman, beautiful, smart and strong; Astrid shared many traits with Merida, but in Merida's intensity he found something that he understood better. Adversity. A little spark of rebellion. A kindred spirit.

The Princess stared him down. "Don't ever say that."

"Huh?"

"The wisps led us here," she said evenly. "Fate brought us together and damn it, yer no goin' anywhere!"

Hiccup stared at her. Wisps? The little blue things she'd told him about? _Fate? _A weird feeling bubbled in the pit of Hiccup's stomach. "Y-you... you think _fate_ brought us together?"

"You needed somewhere to run to. I needed someone to talk to. Even if you didnae find what you were lookin' for, ah'm absolutely sure I did."

And in that moment, Hiccup did find something, something that he didn't even know he had been looking, waiting or even hoping for. In that moment, he could finally put a name to those weird feelings. In that moment, he was sure.

He was in love.

21. Chapter 21

The acknowledgement of his feelings made Hiccup feel much more uncomfortable than usual, and it wasn't like he needed an extra boost to his awkward nature; Merida had offered him her hand to help him get up from the ground and of course, that meant he'd butt-shuffled around her, scurried away from her touch and accidentally dunked his good leg into the water. His trousers and fur boot now squelched as they walked away from the clearing, into the cover of the trees; he left a trail of droplets wherever he walked, but that wasn't nearly as big a concern as the fact that he'd completely embarrassed himself. As usual. It was a good thing Merida lead the way, because if they'd been walking side by side, she would have heard his intermittent mutterings of 'I'm so stupid' and 'I don't even know why she's stuck with me this long.' Toothless, who walked just slightly behind his best friend, heard everything. The dragon didn't know whether to laugh or sympathize - he didn't know what was wrong with Hiccup, exactly, but the pair were so in tune with each other that Toothless could tell when something was up. He just didn't know what to do about it.

"Alright back there?" Merida called. She was a bit concerned about Hiccup's sudden silence. Up until now, they'd shared a good

back-and-forth banter and honestly, it was one of the things she liked best about Hiccup, but he'd been acting so strangely since they'd found him. The Princess used the hand that wasn't appreciatively curled around Angus' bridle to sweep a drifting lock of hair from her face and she dared to peek around at the boy: his head hung towards the ground, his expression careful but from what she could see of his eyes, something unnerved her. She ground to a halt and turned to face him properly, arms crossed. "You... okay?"

Hiccup's head darted up, but he avoided her eyes yet again. "Yeah, yeah, I'm... fine."

"Yeh hurt?"

"...you could say that, yeah."

Merida tilted her head, dissatisfied with his answer, but she didn't press him - from personal experience, she could tell when someone just didn't want to talk. If he did, he would speak up in his own time. "Alright... well... we're not too far now."

"Where are you even going?"

"If ah'm right... the best place for us."

They stopped speaking again and resumed their game of follow the leader, this time with Hiccup astride Toothless' back. The Viking boy was indeed physically hurt - his decent leg had faltered constantly since he'd fallen from Angus, and his head hurt from the cut that came from slicing himself on a rock - but neither of those things mattered quite as much as the mess that Hiccup found himself in. Away from Berk for far too long, the warning signs must have gone off in his dad's head by now. Chief Stoick would be out looking. This wouldn't be too bad if the Vikings didn't have such a strained relationship with the Scots, or if the Scots weren't out to get Hiccup, and it would certainly be a lot easier if the Viking chief's son wasn't in love with the Scots' beloved Princess. Hiccup sighed, watching the girl who walked ahead of him, her mass of hair bouncing every which way; he listened to the friendly tone with which she spoke to her horse, reminding him a lot his relationship with Toothless and how, between friends, species didn't matter; she took the nimble steps of someone who knew every inch of the land, but swung her arms defiantly just because she could. In short, she was strange and wild and different, but beautiful, inside and out. His heart sunk. Hiccup was in too deep.

The pair had arrived through fog and mist at a place that no longer scared Merida: above them stood a stone arch that bore the symbol of a clan long forgotten, beneath the cliff they stood on spread a vast lake, shrouded by more fog and rolling hills and worse, around them laid the crumbling ruins of what once was a beautiful castle. A shudder ripped throughout the bodies of everyone but the Princess. Ghosts had claimed this land long ago. Reluctant to say anything, but unable to stop himself, Hiccup finally piped up. "Uh... Mer...?"

"It's alright, Hiccup." She encouraged quietly. Merida stopped and took a big gulp of air, filling her lungs. She knew there was something about the place that felt distinctly otherworldly, but she

was no longer afraid of it - the Princess was certain that it was the wandering spirit of a prince made free. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Uh... I don't know if you're seeing the same thing as I am. There's plenty to be afraid of. To start with, there's a mean drop to the lake below - one misstep and you're fish food..."

Merida shot him a deadpan look that said 'shut up and trust me.' He complied. She walked ahead of her reluctant companions, completely unfazed by the shabby surroundings, rounding the corner and climbing a set of crumbling stairs that lead to a great, gaping hole that had collapsed into the ground; a rope had been tied around a nearby rock and thrown down into the night-blackened chasm. Hiccup couldn't see a thing, but Merida was confident. She'd been here several times since the whole 'mum-bear' incident and knew exactly where the rope lead, because she was the one that had put it there. She smiled grimly. The current Princess had taken it upon herself to return the innards of the castle to it's former glory - it had been a complete bloody nightmare, shifting all the rubble - and now, it was the perfect spot to hide a runaway Viking. "Ah'm assumin' you'll want me to go first."

"That'd be nice."

Merida rolled her eyes and grabbed the rope, sliding down into the abyss without a second thought. Hiccup's heart leapt into his throat. He didn't know what was down there. Moments of silence passed and the darkness remained lifeless, like the whole castle was a silent beast that had swallowed the girl whole. Then suddenly, there was a tiny flicker of warm orange light that flourished quickly, intermittent spots of light brightening the room below. Torches lit, he could finally see Merida waiting for him at the bottom, hands on her hips and foot tapping impatiently like he was making a big deal out of nothing. Hiccup grunted, but took the rope in hand and followed her down - inevitably landing on the ground with a thump. Thoroughly embarrassed yet again, Hiccup stood with a cough and dusted himself down nonchalantly, trying to ignore the amused look on Merida's face as they waited. Toothless barked from above and sprang down, using a large rock that Merida had been unable to shift as a perch to guide himself. Angus wanted to be down there with them, he didn't like leaving Merida's side, but it was impossible. The horse reluctantly laid down by the gap and watched them all from afar. Split from her steed, Merida frowned, but she had a gut instinct telling her that they were exactly where they needed to be. Hiccup wandered the room, casting a weary eye over the situation. He wasn't exactly convinced by the old castle, but trusted Merida's judgement. The room they were in, though dusty, was almost pleasant: the torchlight gave the chamber a warm, cozy, home-like feel and there were four seats lining a wall, so at least they had somewhere to sit. He squinted his eyes and tilted his head, noticing the intricate carvings at the head of every simple stone chair.

"Are these... thrones?"

"Aye," Merida said, coming to stand by Hiccup's side and observe them. "Ah thought ah already told yeh the legend."

Hiccup thought hard, trying to recall the joyful day where they'd sat on the DunBroch castle tower and bathed in the sun, sharing their

stories. "The four brothers, right?"

"Yeah!" Merida said, obviously pleased. "I didnae think you were listenin'."

"I thought I was your someone to talk to?"

"Talking to someone and havin' them listen are two different things." Merida paused to grin. "Told you it was fate."

Hiccup's gut twisted happily and he moved forward, looking at a medium-sized block of stone that had the Four Brothers depicted on it. There was an obvious split down the middle - the bad brother, Hiccup guessed - but it was held together by a strap of leather. "What's that?"

Merida's expression stayed simple, but there was a knowing look in her eye. She didn't say anything.

"Did... did you... do that?"

The Princess frowned. "Aye."

"Why?"

Immediately, the boy wished he had never asked. A solitary tear rolled down the redhead's cheek and she stepped forward with a sniff and a wobbling lip, kneeling at the sitting on the small steps that separated the thrones from the floor. She trailed a finger over the leather band. "'Fate be changed, look inside. Mend the bond torn by pride.' _It didn't seem fair that I could fix the tapestry and he... he couldn't-"

"Fix this thing?"

"Yeah."

Merida was wild and spirited, that much was true, but Hiccup couldn't help but notice just how much people overlooked her other traits. _'No wonder you're in love with her,_' a voice called from somewhere inside the boy, but he bit his tongue and tried to swallow it back. He sat on the steps too, watching Toothless bound around the room. It was difficult for him, but he knew that he had to do it: Hiccup called up the courage from inside him and gently draped an arm around the girl's shoulder, feeling a sense of pride as she nuzzled into his shoulder. "They can't stay mad at me forever, right?" She sniffed, looking at Hiccup for an answer. He didn't know what to say.

"Well, you're their daughter. At least they won't kill you," Hiccup tried to joke, but this just served to push Merida's emotions. She wailed, both sad and frustrated.

"Ah tried to keep yeh. How could I _still_ be so selfish?"

Hiccup's heart started to pound. Every time she said something like that, his insides went crazy - it felt like his intestines were tying themselves into knots. Even though she needed him to listen, for the first time, his thoughts drifted away. He was lost to a world in which he lived an ideal life: living between Berk and Dunbroch, their families united, her hand intertwined with his own... He shook his

head clear and returned to the present: still hidden in the shadows of a fallen castle, still fugitives from the royal family, still completely in the dark about what to do. But most of all, they were completely oblivious to the night sky. They just assumed the shapes that obscured the moonlight were clouds. But they were wrong. Far above them, Chief Stoick and his band of followers filled the sky in shrewd pursuit. They watched the forest, the glens and the lakes unfold before them like a map, awestruck at the aerial view of this mysterious place.

"Where are we?" Astrid called from somewhere beside the Chief. Many would consider it improper that she rode so brazenly in the front, but the Chief had learned the hard way not to underestimate the intuition of the young - his son lost a leg fighting a demon that he himself had unknowingly tried to conquer for years, and plus, Astrid had found the place. But Stoick was the one who knew it. He gritted his teeth.

"Scotland."

22. Chapter 22

****Author's Note:**** Okay so pretty short one, but it's better than nothing! Too many things to do, too little time...

* * *

><p>The next morning's breakfast was the worst that the castle staff had ever had to endure. Tense did not even begin to describe the atmosphere: Queen Elinor sat at one end of the dining table, tight-lipped and stone cold; King Fergus sat opposite, his bushy eyebrows knitted together, his mouth painted with a permanent scowl; in between them sat the three triplets, who were not at all their boisterous best - even the most mischievous little boys had to notice how their mother and father had skirted around each other all morning, how reluctant the staff were to speak, how even the Lords, who were practically the boys' uncles, had acted differently since the night before. Worst of all, though, was that the big sister the boys idolized (however secretly) was nowhere to be seen. The wayward Princess hadn't returned and in that morning, no-one dared mention her name. A maid shuffled forward gingerly with a plate piled high with food and laid it on the table, but not one of them made a reach for it - because they knew that if she had been there, Merida would have been the first to get stuck in. Thanking the maid for the food that would remain uneaten, Queen Elinor stood, with her face a plain mask to hide the torrent of emotions inside - the last time the Princess had caused an event like this, at least Elinor herself was by the girl's side. But this was a boy they'd never seen before, let alone approved of. And now, they were somewhere out in the wilderness together, perhaps huddled under some tree for shelter - cold, starving, scared. The Queen shuddered. All she wanted was her daughter back home, in her arms, safe. The nerves in her face started to tremble. It was getting increasingly harder to maintain composure. "She's been gone all night, Fergus."

"Let her stay gone, then." The King grunted. At his core, he was desperately sad and worried for his little girl, but stubbornness was a family trait. He couldn't see past the fact that she'd shot at him, that she'd acted so recklessly in front of their guests. "She made

her choice."

"Did she? Or did she even have a choice to make?"

"Well if you've got somethin' to say, dear, dinnae hold back."

"Maybe we were too rash, Fergus."

"Rash!"

"Yes!"

"She was just dancin' with that boy! In the halls! When we had-have-company! If she's grateful for her freedom, she's no got a great way o' showin' it!"

Elinor gave her husband a withering glare. "We do not hold that against her."

The King faltered. "Aye well... doesnae mean she cannae behave."

"We didn't even give her... him a chance. And now's she's gone! Oh Fergus, what if..."

Elinor started, but she couldn't finish; eyelids firmly shut, it was all she could do to contain her tears. The Queen turned away from her husband, her kids and approached the window, learning her forehead against the cool glass. It felt like the weight of the world was pressing down on her shoulders, but really, Fergus had lumbered over at the sight of his saddened Queen and held her close. Even at her most vulnerable she was still elegant; she laid a delicate hand on his chest as they both looked out the window and across their kingdom, which felt all the more vast now that their little girl was lost. "Who was he?" Elinor murmured. "She must care about the boy, Fergus." The King frowned, thinking over the previous night's events. Elinor knew all the marriages, births and deaths, but as King, there wasn't one citizen he didn't at least recognize. And that boy was a complete stranger. However, he was a complete stranger that Merida had risked her life for. Regret flooded his heart. He had acted rashly, and in doing so, he had driven his own daughter away. He sniffed, half-sad, half-proud. A weary smile spread across his lips. "Never thought I'd see the day."

Elinor looked up. "What do you mean?"

"She's in love. She's got to be."

The Queen gasped. It hadn't occurred to her that Merida might actually be in love with the boy.

"You don't think..."

"Aye." He smiled softly. "Aye, ah do."

Elinor laughed tearfully. "Oh, Fergus!"

His wife's joy was lost on the Bear King, because a movement outside the window had caught his eye and of course, he had hoped it was Merida, but instead he saw a whole band of people lumbering across

the bridge. The man who led the charge was all too familiar to Fergus. Being big, burly men with arms the size of tree trunks, a particular taste for facial fair and leaders of their respective people, the men weren't without their similarities; they'd met before and hadn't exactly parted on good terms. King Fergus let go of Elinor and went thundering away, screaming for his men to assemble; Queen Elinor shook her head in amusement. Her husband did take such funny turns. Looking back out the window, it felt as if her heart had stopped and she no longer questioned his judgement. She picked up her skirt, ran to the table and despite their protests, gathered the fidgeting triplets up in her arms and ran after Fergus. "Maudie!" She cried as she passed the maid in the hall. "Gather the staff and follow me!" Soon, the entirety of the castle's company - staff, royalty, visiting Lords or otherwise - had assembled in the main hall, all of them looking either worried or confused or both. Everyone was waiting for King Fergus to speak, but he sat on his throne without a word. One hand was shoved under his chin and he was far away, deep in thought; everyone turned their attention to Elinor, hoping for her to explain. The Queen just held her boys held tightly in her arms, rocking them back and forth, she, too, lost in thought. Lord MacIntosh cleared his throat. "My lady, if you please..."

The sound of her guest's voice sent a shiver through her spine and Elinor gasped back to life, face turning towards the people. She blinked for a moment and buried her fear down deep, all her usual protocol rushing back. Elinor handed her boys to Maudie and straightened herself out, clasping her hands delicately in front of her to address the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen... we may... soon... have company." For the first time in her life, the right words vanished into thin air; it was her duty to the people to keep them safe - the same duty she had failed to uphold for her own daughter. A lump rose in her throat but the Queen forged ahead. "It seems the Vikings have arrived." As expected, disquiet, worry and fear rippled throughout the crowd. Some people gasped. Others grabbed their loved ones. One or two fainted. Such was the history that the Vikings had in the land: the last time the northerners invaded, they had been looking to flee their own godforsaken rock in the middle of the ocean, claiming that 'wild dragons' had invaded them and that they needed refuge. At first, The Vikings were generously offered three days to prepare for the journey home and then after that, they were not to come back - but they refused, instead desperate to claim Scotland as their own. They'd burnt the houses, spoiled the land and pillaged DunBroch, leaving the Scots people with next to nothing - it was only under King Fergus' rule that they prospered again, but the scars of the invasion were engraved into the land and its people. "It may be that we will not have to fight our northern neighbours, but still, we shall not go unprepared; if you are capable and willing, will you stand with us? Will you fight with us?" Elinor cried and the crowd roared back, so much so that the loyalty of her people brought a tear to her eye.

The peoples' cry of approval stirred King Fergus and finally he looked up, stern and determined. "Warriors, to your weapons! Rally the villagers!"

"Those who cannot fight will find shelter here!" Elinor called from the step and watched for a moment as everyone moved into action, then glided down to where Maudie stood, the three little confused princes in her arms. "Take those who seek safety into the cellar." She said to the maid, but her eyes were locked onto the innocent, wide-eyed

stares of her children. "Go down there and keep them safe. Do you understand? _Keep them safe._" Maudie understood perfectly. The triplets were in her care now. She nodded curtly, a soldier of a different kind; she whisked the boys away, a straggle of people following her to the cellars. Tears welled in Elinor's eyes as she watched the faces of her children disappear into the crowd. Merida was out there somewhere, with some strange boy, completely unaware of the situation at the castle. In running from her own family, she'd found safety from a _real_ threat.

But Merida didn't find Vikings all that threatening any more. Especially not now that she had one curled around her. The previous night had been spent talking around the fire and discussing their plans, but eventually the Viking boy couldn't fight the exhaustion any more - he succumbed to his injuries and curled up on the floor, looking much more vulnerable than she had ever seen him. Her heart tugged and Merida had to climb up and out of the ancient throne room to retrieve a bag from Angus' saddle - she had kissed her horse goodnight and taken the bag back down, tucking it under Hiccup's head like a pillow. She carefully draped her cloak over his sleeping form like a blanket, unaware that she being watched by Toothless, who decided then and there that she had won his total approval. The Princess had sat for a while after that, playing with the dragon - they invented a game in which he flicked his tail back and forth, and she tried to catch it - but she too had fallen asleep and when she woke up the next morning, Hiccup's body was tangled up in hers. His arm was wrapped around her waist. She could feel his breath tickling the back of her neck. He moved slightly and pulled her close, almost possessively. And strangely enough, she didn't mind. Being with him wasn't the most awful thing in the world.

23. Chapter 23

****Author's Note:**** Sorry for the inconsistency between updates, guys! I hope you're all still enjoying it - remember to leave me your reviews because _they're basically my favourite things in the world, ever._ I'm trying to be impartial and not mention any names directly so just know that I read every one! Thanks so much!

* * *

><p>"An' you're sure they won't just take one look at us then cut our heads off? Because I seem to remember them, y'know, bein' pretty ferocious foes in the end."<p>

"Quiet, Gobber." Chief Stoick silenced his best friend, but the concern was understood: the vikings were gathered around the door to the Scots' castle, suddenly intimidated. It had been a long time since they'd 'visited' Scotland, and in that time a new generation of young had come along: what kind of example would the adults be setting for the impressionable teens like Snotlout, Ruffnut and Tuffnut if they didn't keep themselves under control? They weren't the same Vikings that had started a war seventeen years ago. Still, he wasn't sure how the Scots were going to react - it wasn't every day that your old enemy turned up looking for their kid, and it would have been even worse if they'd stormed the place on dragonback. Knowing the Scots' skepticism, they had hidden their pets in the surrounding forest, leaving The Chief with nothing but the hope that the Scots' king was a reasonable man. His child was lost and he

needed help, that was all. Stoick sighed and relented, banging an almighty fist against the door and praying to Odin for Hiccup's safe return. Astrid watched eagerly, eyes narrowed and one hand curled around the hilt of her axe. She wasn't prepared to trust anyone. Inside the main hall of the castle, the _thud thud thud_ on the door resonated like an earthquake. The King and Queen sat on their thrones, Elinor sitting tall and proud but with her fingers clasped tightly to the arms of her seat, King Fergus thrusting one hand out to hush the anxious people who gathered at the tables below. All eyes were on the door. "Let them in."

Guards Martin and Gordon went to swing the doors open and everyone bristled as the Vikings came into view. Stoick gestured for his group to follow his lead and walked calmly into the hall, to the foot of the thrones and bowed his head. "Your majesties--"

"I thought I told you never to show your face around here again, Stoick."

"Fergus, _please_," Elinor hissed and put one hand over her husband's, squeezing slightly to reassure him. He looked across to his queen and nodded once, a silent agreement to the equally silent plea on her face_ - behave. _She looked across the Chief's men, surprised to see the young _Hooligans_ amongst them - a burly boy, a beefy boy, a pair of twins and a stern-looking blond girl, wearing a look of determination not unlike the one she had seen worn by her own daughter. It was strange that they brought their young, but Elinor did not judge the children for the actions of the Vikings' past any more than she filled her own children with Viking hatred. They were just children, and in her eyes, were welcome to be there as long as they, too, were on their best behaviour.

"Och, alright. Speak."

Chief Stoick resented being spoken to so harshly, but he didn't blame them, knowing that if he were in that position, he'd be equally distrusting. "As I was saying, _your majesties_, it is with a heavy heart that I have returned to this land-" somewhere in the crowd, people grunted and murmured and growled their displeasure. "-but my son has gone missing, and I-_we_ were hoping for your permission to search here."

"If he's no on your land, how would he be here?" King Fergus chuckled darkly. "Did he steal yer boats?"

"No." Stoick replied, straightening himself out to meet the King's eye. Even with their history, it wasn't hard for the Chief to say what he said next: "He went out with his dragon and never came back."

The King wasn't the only one to laugh. The crowd of people dismissed the notion easily, but Elinor looked into the Chief's eyes, seeing a reflection of herself: a lost child, a parental need for their safety, the heartbreak they both held beneath the surface. "I believe him."

The crowd murmured and Fergus stared at his wife, spluttering in disbelief. "What-what-what! You cannae believe such... such _nonsense!_"

"Last year, I wouldn't have believed it was possible to become a bear, but I did. And if that magic exists - and we know it does - who's to say that dragons do not?"

"Elinor, yeh cannae be-"

The Queen ignored her husband and locked her eyes onto those of the Viking chief. "When you last came to our lands, you claimed dragons as enemies. Now you claim them as friends. Would you be so kind as to explain your position?"

Stoick looked deep in thought. "My boy found out the truth about the dragons - they were serving a giant beast, somethin' so monstrous they had no choice but to attack us! Hiccup - my son - well, he..." Stoick wanted to continue, but the image of Hiccup falling from the sky in a blaze of hellfire was something that he'd never forget. It burned brightly in his memory and every day, he punished himself for Hiccup's lost leg.

"He trained the dragons." Astrid said and then suddenly, became all too aware of the hundreds of eyes peering at her. Astrid bowed her head quickly to show her respect to the foreign royalty, not seeing the twinkle in the Queen's eye - a girl speaking for an elder. Not the first time the Scots had seen it. "It's okay," Elinor soothed. "You are free to continue." Fergus stared at Elinor still, always in awe of how she controlled any situation with such grace - not that he would have given the angry wee blonde a chance.

"Well, okay, the dragons are kind of a part of our village now. Like pets."

"I see." Elinor paused, mulling over the information - pet dragons! In her wildest dreams, Elinor never would have thought it possible - against Fergus' more practical approach, she had always been a firm believer in the supernatural - becoming a bear had just confirmed it. "Fergus," She said lowly, trying to keep from being heard. "I can see they don't mean any harm. We should let him look."

"WHAT!"

Subtlety was never the Bear King's strong point. Elinor rolled her eyes and smiled crookedly, amused by her husband's boisterous nature; she had been hoping for a quiet discussion but should have known the likelihood of that ever happening. "Fergus, how could we deny the man a chance to look while our own child is missing?"

"Easily. Say 'no'. Simple as that."

"Fergus."

The King groaned and diverted his attention away from his wife, back to his old enemy. "Fine. What does he look like?"

Chief Stoick stared. "What?"

"What. Does. He. Look. Like?"

"My son?"

"AYE, YOUR SON! What does he look like?!"

"Well he's sort of a gangly lad, not much for fightin'. Long brown hair and green eyes and..."

"Freckles!" Astrid called.

"Yeah... freckles."

"I see. And..." Elinor paused, swallowing. She wasn't sure if she wanted to ask her next question. "How many legs does he have?"

Stoick blustered. "Only one!"

Queen Elinor gasped, covering her mouth with her hands and glancing at Fergus who, at first, did not understand what she was implying; as soon as the thought gathered in his head, it was like Stoick had just stuck a sword through the King's gut. Merida's companion, or at least, what they could remember of him, matched the Vikings' description perfectly. "Oh well that's just _grand!_" The Hooligans glanced about at one another, quite unsure of just what the King meant. Lord Dingwall, who had just been sitting at the lords' table with nothing but a mug of beer and one eye firmly locked in the Vikings' direction, quickly clung to his own suspicion and could not help himself. "Do you mean that skinny wee runt we were goin' after yesterday?-"

"Lord Dingwall, _please." _Elinor hissed desperately, but the Lord did not notice. He was much too concerned with his own brilliance, having realized just who the 'skinny wee runt' was.

"-Because that was most irregular, that. Struttin' around here like he owns the place. Good thing we chased him off!"

The main hall became so silent you could have heard a fly's breath and Chief Stoick's eyebrows furrowed, concerned by what he was hearing. "What does he mean?" He commanded, thrusting a finger in the talkative lords' direction - MacGuffin and MacIntosh stared at Dingwall as if he himself had just grown a pair of wings and a scaly snout. "I'm afraid we have seen your boy. He caused a bit of commotion here-" Elinor started carefully, trying to choose the right words. Stoick rolled his eyes and Gobber nudged him in the belly, the blacksmith grinning, feeling somewhat proud of his protégé. It was typical of Hiccup, causing havoc wherever he went - at least in that sense, he truly was a Viking. But the Chief didn't like the sound of where the Queen's words were going.

"-and, well, you see... we didn't take too kindly to having a stranger in the castle."

"What are you saying?"

For once, Elinor was speechless. She looked to her husband desperately, unsure that the truth was suitable.

"What we're sayin' is aye, we've seen your lad. And we didnae exactly make him welcome."

"Did you _attack_ my son?"

There was a murmur of shock throughout the Hooligans' group and Elinor pressed her lips together so tightly they disappeared from her face. Fergus' eyes blazed dangerously and Chief Stoick stared straight back, challenging the Scot. Dingwall did not know when to stop. "Aye, you could say that... and our swords would agree! " MacIntosh clamped his hand over the tactless man's mouth, but the damage was done. Stoick's breath came through his nose like a bull and Gobber took hold of the Chief's shoulders, trying to steady him and keep him from doing something he was sure to regret; Astrid's hand gripped her axe hilt so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

Elinor's heart drummed against her ribcage like thunder. Her breath was becoming increasingly short. She had been a much younger Queen the first time they'd had trouble with the Hooligans, and even now, seventeen years later and full of experience, she did not want a fight. But the words that could quell the Chief's anger were nowhere to be found and she could do nothing but watch as the Viking dragged his group off into a corner, shouting inaudibly and ready for war. King Fergus stood up, threw his head back and marched down the steps, through the people gathered at the tables and came to a halt just where the Vikings were arguing amongst themselves - the blonde girl slipped through the castle door on her Chief's command, unseen by the Scots and on a mission. "VIKING! You will not turn your back on us! IN OUR KINGDOM!" The King roared and Stoick reacted immediately, turning to face the man who had led a hunt against his boy and throwing a punch that the Scot was quick enough to avoid. "You started this, Fergus!" Stoick bellowed.

While the brawl began, Astrid was making her way down the path that led from the castle and into the wilderness, secretly satisfied when the occasional villager flinched at her appearance. She smirked at them and playfully tapped her axe, taunting them, goading them because they were just so scared. Good thing too, she thought. They'd do well not to underestimate her. Pausing on the bridge to take a look up at the castle (she'd never seen a castle before), she had to admit that it was a shame. This land was beautiful. It was vast and lush, with rolling hills and an open sky like she'd never seen - exactly the kind of place that Hiccup would love. Her gut twisted at the thought of her on-again, off-again partner - in her eyes, their eventual relationship was an inevitability, she was the most worthy girl in all of Berk - and with Hiccup in mind, she forged ahead into the forest and to the cramped space where the Vikings had stored their dragons.

Stormfly, her own Deadly Nadder, perked up at the sight of her rider and Astrid leapt onto the dragon's back at the first opportunity, rallying the others to follow: she and Stormfly hovered in the sky and watched as Barf, Belch, Meatlug and the others spread their mighty wings to follow them up, back to the castle where Stoick was waiting for the Vikings' most beloved pets - and deadliest weapons.

24. Chapter 24

****Author's Note:**** Sorry for the extra long wait this time, but I've been even busier than usual - it was my birthday! - so to make up for it, how about a longer-than-usual chapter? Hope you guys enjoy it, and thanks for your patience :)

* * *

><p>During the day that had passed since Merida and Hiccup had arrived at the ruins of Mor'du's castle, they both became increasingly happy with the other's companionship: Hiccup had already come to terms with the fact that he was falling for the Scottish Princess, but he never ceased to be amazed by her energy, her resourcefulness, her wit - she had a certain sparkle uniquely her own, and Merida could see exactly the same thing in him. Practically everyone else beyond her own family paled in comparison to Hiccup's intuition and intelligence, to his offbeat charm and, most importantly, his obviously generous heart - in the morning, he had woken to find himself clinging to her like a limpet and immediately jumped back, apologizing profusely for his lack of decorum; in the afternoon, most of Merida's time was consumed by laughing at the back-and-forth banter between the boy and his dragon. But then he pulled her aside and quietly, in a very Hiccup-like way, thanked her for humouring him. "For what?" She had laughed. "Oh, y'know, my complete lack of courage when it came to facing the situation. You kind of just indulged my need for... a day off. Thanks," He had replied, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously. The way he had said it made it sound like she was doing him some big favour and the comment had caught her off guard - not just because she, too, had needed a 'day off', but Merida thought that Hiccup was very courageous. "I just haven't had the chance to see yeh in action, yet," She joked, nudging his arm playfully and watching the coy smile tweak the corners of his lips. "I bet yer a force to be reckoned with!"<p>

Night had fallen quickly after that and the foursome worked together to build a more effective campsite: Angus, still beyond the cavernous throne room, used his above-ground location to collect branches and throw them down to the others. From there, Hiccup used the branches to build a fire that was then lit by Toothless. (Merida still reacted with awe at the dragon's fire-breathing ability, and Toothless was always eager for a chance to show off.) Of course, the awkward part was the fact that, with only her cloak and sack for bedding, it was either share or freeze. Hiccup being Hiccup, he chose to freeze. The Viking boy shed his fur vest to use as a pillow and got himself comfy on a nice bit of floor - the idea of sleeping on the thrones freaked him out, and there was no way he was going to embarrass himself with Merida again. He had reached the uncomfortable stage of his crush where he both yearned to be physically close to her, and yet still wanted to be as far away from her as possible. In his mind, the humiliation was inevitable. But, like many things with Merida, it just wasn't that easy. Hiccup had chosen to remove himself, and she had chosen to stay near him anyway. She took one look at his pitiful sleeping position and unceremoniously flopped down next to him, spreading her cloak over them both - his heart roared like a lion, thundering against his ribcage. And that was that. He had no choice but to be close to her simply because she wanted to be close to him. "Night, Hic," Merida had murmured in that velvet-soft voice only drowsiness could muster, completely unaware of the effect she had on the poor boy. "Night," Hiccup croaked in reply, now much too nervous to sleep. Toothless stomped over and curled himself protectively around the seventeen-year-olds, caught Hiccup's eye with a teasing, mocking glance and it was all the boy could do just to mumble '_shut up, '_ and bury himself under Merida's cloak.

And when he woke the next morning, all the world was fire.

Hiccup had panicked initially, thinking that they were all in danger - waking up to a bright orange glow was never a good thing, unless you happened to be buried under a mass of wild ginger hair. His frantic heart barely relaxed, because he realized that, yet again, he had become entangled with Merida. Her head was nuzzled into his chest, hair splayed in every direction. One hand was curled under her 'pillow', the other laid on his chest. Their legs had become almost indistinguishable from one another - he could even feel the weight of her foot gently resting on his own metal prosthetic. If panic could be pleasant, that's exactly what he felt - Hiccup didn't want to move a muscle for fear of having the Princess move away from him, for fear of ruining the moment. It was sometimes hard for Hiccup to remember that he'd come a long way, that he wasn't the awkward apprentice any more: he was a dragon trainer now, a dragon conqueror, and it was equally as difficult to remember that he did not need to be those things all the time, twenty-four seven. They were awfully big names to live up to. But when he was with Merida, he could be all those things and more. With Merida, he could be Hiccup - whatever that was. So he dared to inch closer to the girl and let his eyelids flutter closed, content just to leave the world alone a little bit longer. Unfortunately, in their happy stupor, they all remained oblivious to the true danger: it was indeed fire that splintered orange light across the walls, flaring bright every now and again as ball upon ball of flame arced through the sky and engulfed the walls of DunBroch castle. Panic, it seemed, could come in many forms: the rage of his son under threat had blinded Chief Stoick's better judgement and clouded his head with rage, leading him to call every available viking adult to their respective dragon and the Hooligans had formed one massive, flame-throwing weapon of war. However, he was clear-thinking enough to ask every viking teenager to stay behind. Chief Stoick could appreciate the younger warriors, but he didn't want the next generation heading off into battle so soon - not that many of them felt ready, or even like it was necessary. Snotlout buried his terror under his usual arrogance and Fishlegs made no secret of his unwillingness, leaving only Tuffnut as a ready and willing participant. The male twin was ready to get out there and cause some pain, but he stood alone because, for once, Ruffnut didn't share his bloodthirsty enthusiasm. In fact, she was on the same page as Astrid: both blonde battleaxes could see that not only was the attack unfounded, it was also cruel. Dragons were certainly an unfair advantage against the Scots and Astrid couldn't seem to forget the look of pain in the Scottish Queen's eyes.

Free to wander and free to act if someone decided to pick a fight, the young Hooligans were left to their own devices and had traipsed into the forest, turning their back on the harsh truth of the attack and even the more boisterous kids found their tongues silenced by the solemn mood. They wandered far. They wandered listlessly. They wandered until-

"Woah." The twins gasped in unison.

A ring of stones loomed high over the heads of the teenagers, casting an imposing shadow over them all. They stood in silence, mystified by the stones which seemed to have neither reason nor right to be there: mostly smooth and terribly tall, they looked completely out of place and yet somehow timeless, like they'd been there for a thousand years and would be there for thousands more. One of the stones, however,

was broken. It had obviously once been as tall as it's siblings, but a split had reduced to no more than a mere stump. "Ugh, _yessss," Snotlout groaned loudly as he noticed the shortened rock. He lumbered forward ungracefully, head tossed back in exasperation and sat his large posterior down on the stone with a thump, causing Fishlegs to make a strangled yelping sound - there was an ominous air about the place, but it seemed only he had noticed as no-one else chose to argue; Ruff and Tuff jogged forward and sat next to Snotlout, clearly too weary to care. "Alright," Astrid said, taking her usual authoritative tone. "Alright. Yeah. You guys can... rest here for just now."

"Well what else is there to do?" Ruff moaned.

"And why did you say you guys?" Snotlout added.

"Well... I'm gonna go look for Hiccup."

"He's probably dead." Tuff said nonchalantly.

"Definitely dead." Ruff agreed.

"Oh come on babe, you can't go out _there-_" Snotlout wailed, gesturing wildly at the surrounding forest, -"alone! You'll die too!" He wasn't really concerned for the girl's safety though. Astrid was more than capable of taking on a whole, foreign forest alone. He was really just annoyed that she was still interested in Hiccup. It was Hiccup this, Hiccup that; she could do so much better. Like himself. But Astrid didn't see it the same way and her expression hardened. She was, unfortunately, used to him undermining her talent with his 'macho' act, and she _hated_ it when he called her babe. She gripped her axe threateningly, eyes narrowed at the bulky, black-haired boy. He saw her face and blanched. "He's not dead," Astrid hissed. Just... lost." With that, she turned on her heel and defiantly marched up the nearest, clearest forest trail, arms swinging mechanically by her side, the rhythm of her footsteps doing little to calm her angry, wandering mind; Astrid was a girl of action. Waiting for it 'all to blow over' or for Hiccup to "turn up" just wasn't good enough - she could walk, talk, hear and see, and that was all the ammunition she needed. Halfway up the winding trail, by her estimation, the viking girl paused to shake a flyaway hair from her face and gather her thoughts: it seemed she'd walked further than she'd realized, as the tall stones had dipped below the horizon and she couldn't see her friends any more. An unsettling feeling sunk into her stomach. She was capable, yes - brilliantly so - but even the most brilliant people could be unsure and, being in another country, lost in the trees and far away from 'civilization', Astrid realized that she was, indeed, unsure. The blue glow of a wisp flickered dimly in the shroud of some wild heather, quietly observing the unknown girl who traipsed through their woods. Many a man had been led to great fortune and favour by the wisps, and even more had been led to their deaths; it decided that it would not help, nor harm, the pursuit of this blonde stranger - she was foreign to them, and they had no reason to intervene. Astrid had not seen the mysterious spirit. She forged ahead, completely, utterly alone.

Back at the ruins, at least one creature was finally stirring: Angus, Merida's trusty Clydesdale, was coming to his senses, and so increased his awareness of the noise, of the heat; the horse raised its head to look skyward and immediately leapt into action, whinnying

and braying, desperate for someone, anyone, to notice. Toothless was roused from his slumber by the horse's noise and jumped onto the large stone positioned near the hole in the ceiling, intending to give Angus a good scare and shut him up, but as he got closer, Toothless saw the problem. And not only could he see the problem, he knew it's cause - _dragons._ His own kind. Toothless barked at the horse and leapt down from the large rock, landing right beside Hiccup's head and promptly prodded the boy's gut with his large, scaly paw.

"Geroff," Hiccup groaned. He was much too comfortable. Everything was fine.

Toothless didn't prod him again. It was more like a punch. Hiccup wheezed ("Aw, come on! What are you doing?!"), the air knocked straight from his lungs and he clutched at his stomach, rolling over straight onto Merida's hair. Feeling the change in weight, the girl tugged. She tugged again. And again, until she finally freed her hair from underneath the Viking boy and turned to scream bloody murder at him for daring to crush her precious hair. "Oi!" Merida yelled, the annoyance waking her immediately, but she faltered when she saw the look of pain on his face. "Hic...?"

BOOM.

A tremor ripped through the ground and shook the already crumbling walls, debris tumbling from every crack and crevice as another blast of orange light shattered across the stone. Merida sat bolt upright and rubbed her eyes, trying to tell herself that what she was seeing wasn't real but-

BANG.

More light. More shaking. Terror flooded the Princess' body: her kingdom, her _family,_ was under attack. How hadn't she noticed before?

"No, no, no, _no!" _She wailed desperately, jumping to her feet, grabbing her bow and immediately going to scramble up the rock pile that led to the opening, where she could see her frantic steed, it was only a short climb and then she could go-

"Mer!" Hiccup coughed, still clutching his stomach. In her haste, she'd forgotten him, but the part of her that felt guilty was eclipsed by her fear for her family. Her mother! Her father! _The boys!_ They were so small, they wouldn't know what was going on, her family needed her, what kind of Princess was she? What kind of daughter?

"Merida!"

The sound of his voice stirred her from her thoughts and the redhead slid back down the rock, at his side in an instant. They didn't need to speak. Fear was radiating from her. Her eyes were wide with panic. Her bottom lip was crushed between her teeth as if trying to keep herself together. Yet she still managed to offer him her hand and the boy, with her help, struggled to his feet. Merida was ready to flee, but he didn't let go.

"Hiccup..."

Hiccup didn't know what was going on yet or why, but he had a fairly good idea and it turned his stomach. Bile rose in his throat. If he was right, he didn't know if he could forgive himself for it, being the beacon that brought them here... he didn't know what to do except put his arms around her. Merida made a strange, strangled noise and slumped into the hug.

"It's g-gonna be fine, Mer. It'll be fine."

He didn't know who he was trying to convince, Merida or himself.

She looked at him sadly. She wanted to believe it. She didn't.

Toothless was becoming impatient. Yes, the girl needed comfort, but she also needed to get to her family. There was a battle going on out there, a battle that shook the earth and set the sky ablaze. Merida pulled away from him, her usual determination back and fiercer than ever, the few tears that had slipped quietly from her eyes serving as warpaint. There she was again. The warrior was back. Hiccup tried to mimic her determination when he gestured towards the saddle that rested on Toothless' back, but was surprised when she refused it. "Thanks," The Princess whispered grimly, fastening her cloak over herself and making sure her quiver was secure. "But there's only one steed for me."

"But it's faster! And... well, I don't want to say this, but he's kind of got more firepower..."

Merida seemed to consider this for a moment. "Alright. But let me speak to Angus first."

It might have seemed weird that she wanted to 'speak' to the horse, but it was something that Hiccup could understand better than anyone else. Even the other dragon riders couldn't understand or come close to the relationship that he shared with Toothless, and it certainly wasn't the kind of thing he'd seen anyone share with an animal before, so when they reached the surface, he and the dragon waited for Merida. The Princess approached her equine friend and put one hand on either side of his muzzle, holding his gaze. "Go to Mum and Dad. If they see you, maybe they'll..."

Maybe what? Merida frequently left with Angus, but she'd never sent the horse home alone before. If he returned alone, they'd probably think she was dead or something but there was no time to worry about it. Toothless was her best option: with him, she could survey the action from the sky and, if necessary, get involved with both his firepower and a vantage point for shooting. Plus, she wanted to be with Hiccup. "They'll understand. They'll just have to." With a sigh, Merida closed her eyes and rested her head against Angus for just a second and he returned the favour, a silent understanding between the friends. "Love you," She whispered, patting his neck. "Now go. I'll see yeh all soon." On her instruction, the horse cantered off into the woods alone, for the first time, and she had no choice but to just watch him go.

Astrid's head had cleared immeasurably by around lunchtime, the anger had ebbed and she was now rather enjoying her search for Hiccup. The forests in DunBroch weren't completely different from what they had

on Berk, every step she took becoming easier, more familiar, but there was no terrain in the world that Astrid Hofferson couldn't traverse. 'It just takes a little time', she thought smugly to herself, 'to settle in-'

WHOOSH. In a storm of hoofprints and flying fur, Astrid had been thrown to the ground. It took a moment to clear her head, but when she came around, Astrid peered around the trees and down the trail from which she had came, astounded by the sight of a massive horse sprinting back towards civilization. Wild or not, it certainly knew the forest way better than she did, but what really confused her was why. Why was it running towards, and not, from the battle? Was it fleeing from someone? Where did it come from? All were questions she intended to answer. Astrid got to her feet, and, deciding that the matter was more urgent than she thought, took off running.

It took her about ten minutes to arrive at a place unlike anything she'd ever seen before. Through a light, dewy mist that clouded the grass and confused her footsteps, a stone archway appeared. On the top, it had a circular symbol of crossed axes that Astrid didn't really understand, but kind of liked (how could she not, when an axe was her weapon of choice?). Whatever it meant, though, the place seemed to be deserted, and it certainly gave off an eerie, ghostly aura that would have sent any other, weaker Viking running for the hills. Astrid just swallowed, unsheathed her axe and pressed forward. There was no way she was going to come this far, and then not investigate. As she walked (now firmly holding her axe across her chest), shapes appeared from the mist. It didn't take her long to figure out that it was the ruins of a castle, and immediately it clicked that the axe-symbol must have been the mark of a Scot tribe. Astrid shivered. Whoever they were, they weren't here now.

But someone was. There were strange, muffled voices coming from not very far away and, for a terrifying moment, the Viking girl thought she had upset some long-dormant spirit, and yet she still pressed on. Thud, thud, thud. Astrid was slapping the hilt of her axe against the palm of her hand, trying to steady her nerves by concentrating on the weight, and the rhythm-

A shadow in the mist. Big and dark, with a long tail-

A long tail?

Night fury. Toothless._ Hiccup!_

25. Chapter 25

****Author's Note: ****Sorry for the wait, folks. Life's picking up again and I don't always have the time to write, but I haven't forgotten! My Mericcup heart will never falter! Anyway, if you'd be so kind as to leave me some feedback, I'd be most grateful. The fact people are still favouriting and following blows my mind, and I couldn't possibly thank you all enough! Everything is most appreciated, and I hope you all enjoy chapter... 25? 25. Wow.

* * *

><p>Astrid Hofferson was not the type of girl to cry, but there was no denying the emotion that overcame her in the moment she realized

just who laid beyond the heavy mist. Right there, just of out of sight but not beyond her reach, was Hiccup. There was no mistaking the shadow of the tail - one tail wing was clearly different than the other - and wherever Toothless was, Hiccup was guaranteed to follow (and vice versa.) There was no stopping it. Astrid laughed, a laugh that let free the weight of his absence and echoed the joy she couldn't contain. In a split second, she'd chosen a rock to casually throw her axe upon and fighting back tears, launched through the fog. Except she didn't find Hiccup. Instead, she found herself staring at the point of an arrow targeted directly at her throat. She froze. Why did she drop her axe? 'Stupid, stupid, stupid Astrid!' she thought desperately, never once imagining that Hiccup would be with someone else.

As Hiccup distracted himself with adjusting Toothless' saddle and harness for something other than a joy ride, Merida had assigned herself the job of lookout and found herself glad of that awareness when she heard footsteps approaching, heavy but fast. They marched ever quicker, much like Hiccup's had on the first night they met - the stride of the stranger was set with the same amount of purpose, but this time, Merida hadn't done anything. Instinctively, she raised her bow. A girl came into view and Merida almost lowered her weapon, but the studs, rivets and metal of the girl's attire spoke volumes of her heritage: Viking. It was a thought Merida had grappled with in the time since she had woken - would she kill a Viking? How could she, having met one who, unlike what knowledge she had of his kinsmen and their history with her kingdom, she counted as a friend? She didn't have an answer. But the first Viking she'd come face to face with, outside Hiccup, was certainly around their age and with an unsettling twist in her gut, Merida realised that Hiccup must know the newcomer, because the first word out of her mouth was his name.

"Hiccup?" Astrid said weakly, seeing the unmistakable figure of him beyond her assailant. The redheaded girl who kept her at bay was of little to no interest to her, not yet. He was alive. That was all that mattered.

Hiccup couldn't believe his ears. A female had called his name and that was rare enough, but it wasn't Merida. He was so comfortable with his name in her voice now that he'd forgotten what it sounded like coming from- "Astrid!" He leapt from his crouched position with renewed dexterity and lumbered forward, not exactly sure what he was intending to do but the thrill of seeing her was so real that he didn't care. He didn't notice Merida's bow. He just threw his arms around Astrid and held her tight.

Merida had no choice but to stand back, one, two, three big backward steps and watch the reunion unfold. But she didn't lower her bow. She didn't know why she wasn't lowering it - clearly, she had no reason to harm the stranger, who certainly wasn't a stranger to Hiccup - but her arms refused her and her gut twisted even tighter, a sense of nausea bubbling angrily in her stomach. It just didn't feel _right, _seeing the reaction this girl elicited from Hiccup. She wanted to look away. She couldn't.

"Astrid, am I glad to see you!" Hiccup said brightly, pulling away from the hug. "Always good to have another one on my side, makes a _pleasant _change-"

"Who's she?" Emotional reunion complete, the redhead girl who'd so brazenly targeted her was suddenly at the forefront of Astrid's worries. She saw that the other girl had distanced herself, and Astrid did the same; she retrieved her axe and held it across her chest defensively, observing the girl. The hair and rather plain looking woolen dress were enough to know that the archer wasn't one of their tribe, and so it stood to reason that she was a Scot. Now, Astrid didn't like what was going on, but they had attacked Hiccup, so to see him fraternizing with one of them didn't make much sense to her. Eyes firmly narrowed, Astrid looked between Hiccup and the redhead, trying to make sense of it all.

And just like that, Hiccup found himself caught in the crossfire. The tension between the two females was rife and even Toothless stared, rapt with interest at the not-so-subtle standoff. Astrid had begun rhythmically hitting the hilt of her axe again, but this time with that war-hungry competitive look in her eye. Merida held her bow aloft, still aimed at Astrid's neck, not so much competitive as defensive, but still a snarl curled the corners of her lips. Hiccup was stunned. Why did Merida look like that?

"I am Merida of the clan DunBroch, Princess of this Kingdom," Merida spoke clearly, in a tone that recalled her mother's grace and diplomacy; Hiccup stood, clearly not part of this interaction, in awe at Merida's sudden regality. "And who are you?"

Astrid's steely gaze faltered and she stared at Hiccup. Princess. This girl - this Merida - was the Princess? Teeth firmly clamped together, the Viking girl was left questioning the proper way to act - was she really royalty? Would Merida lie about it? She didn't want to offend the royal family any further, but the Princess didn't seem all that royal to her. No Princess could hold a bow like that. "Astrid." She said, her voice clipped and curt. "Of the Hairy Hooligan tribe. Berk. One of Hiccup's."

"Right. Nice to meet you, Astrid." Merida lowered her bow and dropped the regal pretense with great difficulty, but it seemed like the right thing to do. The last thing she wanted was to alienate Hiccup's friends. Merida stuck her hand out, hoping that Astrid would recognize the gesture as a sort of peace offering and though Astrid was still wary, she knew better than to refuse the hand of a Princess. She lowered her axe and shook the outstretched hand.

"Well!" Hiccup chipped in, trying to be somewhat casual but failing miserably. "Better... get going then..."

Astrid stared at him. "What do you mean, get going?"

"Don't know if yeh've noticed, Astrid, but your people are kind of attacking my people." Merida said coolly.

"Oh-ho-hooo, I've noticed alright-" The axe was swinging dangerously again.

"Well then yeh'll know it's my duty to be where the action is, so if you'll excuse us-"

"Us? I can understand you going, but why him?"

"The battle's ragin' and ah only see one form of transportation around here - and ah certainly don't think Hic could give me a piggy back fast enough."

Astrid seethed. 'Hic.' She called him '_Hic.' _And not only had she called him 'Hic,' the so-called Princess had also implied that she was going to ride Toothless. "Shame you don't have a dragon of your own, then. Pretty sure that _Hic_ and I need to be by his father's side, so if _you_ excuse _us-_"

Hiccup's eyes flicked from one girl to the other. He never actually thought he'd see the day where two girls were fighting over him - to many young men, it would be an enviable position, but Hiccup felt terrible. He cared about both girls deeply and even though he doubted his chances with Merida, he still wanted to stand by her side. He didn't like this war. He didn't agree with it. United, he and Merida stood a better chance of reaching an understanding between the tribe and the clan, but separated, who would listen?

"Astrid," He said, finding his voice. "We-_Merida_ and I-need to go."

Astrid stepped back, stunned. "You-you..."

She grabbed his arm and dragged him out of Merida's earshot, to which the Princess responded by raising her bow once more. "Hurt him and I won't hesitate!"

"Ow-ow-ow-ow..."

"You're picking her?" Astrid deadpanned, still keeping a firm grip on his arm. Though she had gained some restraint through her teenage years, Astrid's anger still manifested physically, and it was something Hiccup was both accustomed to and didn't blame her for. He liked her just the way she was, feisty and physical and in that sense, she was similar to Merida. However, Astrid could get too serious, too intense. "Picking her?" He mumbled. "I'm not picking..."

Astrid was nobody's fool. "You like her!" She gasped, the shock slackening her grip and Hiccup pulled himself free, yanking his sleeve and and rubbing the sore spot left where her fingers had been. He hid his face and let out a nervous, short, high pitched laugh. "Don't be ri-ridiculous! Why would I like her when she wouldn't ever like me-" Hiccup realized what he said too late and the swift punch on the arm he got was proof.

"You -complete - _idiot - _I go traipsing around for hours looking for you and for what? To find you with... some other girl..."

Astrid Hofferson was not the type to cry, but the tears prickled her eyes and dried her throat. The boy - the _man_ - she loved had been away for such a short period of time... they were on-again, off-again, inevitable partners. So how had he found someone else? "Well when you find out she doesn't like you back I won't be waiting." She spat bitterly, wiping her eyes with her arm and once again, taking her axe across her chest defensively. She shot off into the forest without another word.

"Astrid, _wait!_"

He could explain. Oh gods, let him explain. The only thing more painful than Astrid's punch was seeing her hurt.

Merida, who had sat down next to Toothless to observe the exchange, was surprised by the sudden turn of events. Where had the Viking girl gone? She looked upset, but why? Merida hated to see anyone like that and, as Hiccup approached, saddened look on his face, she got up to greet him.

"Hey..." She said softly, putting her arms around him. "It's-it's... okay." Independent by nature, Merida wasn't exactly in tune with the feelings of others, and regularly cursed the fact she was no good at comforting people. The only people she could comfort were her brothers, and they were only little; hugging was the only thing she could think of. Hiccup let himself be absorbed by her embrace for one short moment, then pulled away, trying to clear his expression of anything but determination and purpose. "Okay. Let's go."

"Hiccup...?"

"Please, let's just go."

Merida looked him up and down for a moment, wanting to say something but knowing better. The emotion of the situation had just been heightened by Astrid's arrival, and even though the other girl had stirred up some deeply unsettling feelings in the Princess' heart, she just wanted things to go back to normal. Whatever that was. With a shudder, she thought of how the attack came about and gazed at the face of the boy she'd risked everything for, wondering if it had all been worth it.

Taking the front of his shirt firmly in fist, she yanked him close and pressed her lips against his cheek for a brief moment, hoping that her kiss would serve as a boost of confidence, a thank you, a 'you mean the world to me and I can't figure out why.'

Dragon conqueror Hiccup, legitimate grown-up and pride of the Hairy Hooligans, just about fainted. The last time he felt this weak, he'd just set Toothless free and was frightened for his own life. But this kind of weak was good, incredible even. Electricity and fire surged through his veins and the world seemed sharp, crisp, clear. Alive. She had kissed him, and if he could get her to do that, he could do anything. He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards Toothless, mounting the dragon's back like he had a thousand times before but with this new view, this fire - there was a battle raging, and he intended to win it. Merida, happy to see him moving again but uncomfortable with the silence, followed suit. She sat behind him and, though she inwardly wanted to put her hands around his waist and take off over the lochs and glens again, just the three of them, she instead readied her bow.

The pair shared a nod of acknowledgement and knowing that Merida was ready, Hiccup patted Toothless' side and gave him a meaningful look.

"It's time, bud."

In an instant, they were airborne and racing towards the castle. A

map of action unfolded beneath them, a blur of green trees and bright flames and the metal of swords upon axes, glinting and deadly in the afternoon daylight: in the distance, they could see the rangy, sinuous figure of Lord MacIntosh and his party, defending the main archway from intruders; Lord Dingwall in the village, Finlay Dingwall's jaws clamped around the ankle of some unfortunate Viking; with a pang of guilt, Merida saw that Lord MacGuffin was heading a counter-assault on the bridge, his son Ian by his side. Ian was a strong, beefy blonde lad and the only eligible male that Merida had ever shown any interest in or cared about - the only one that she wouldn't have minded settling for, if the worst had come to the worst. Seeing him there, in the heat of their own mini-war, one hand holding a shield and his free arm swatting away enemies like they were no more than flies - many screaming bodies tipping over the bridge's edge - brought a guilty tear to Merida's eye. As one Viking swooped in on Ian, Merida steadied herself and aimed squarely at the enemy's leg.

It was the most incredible feeling, the clarity that came with taking a shot. Every minute detail came into focus. Her eyes narrowed. She took a deep breath.

And she lowered her bow.

It was with a great, sighing exhale that her body slumped forward, her arms sagging, bow drooping out of hand somewhat. Merida could only watch her target stride into battle, take a swing at Ian then promptly be thrown over the bridge like so many before him, only vaguely noticing that she, too, was being watched. Hiccup looked at her in wonder, unsure how to feel. She had aimed at a Viking. But she didn't go through with it.

"He was goin' for Ian," Merida said, feeling the boy's nervous energy rolling off him in waves. "I just..."

"Why is it that going for your bow is always the first thing you do? You did it with Astrid, too."

"Well excuse me for not wantin' tae go in to battle unarmed. He was goin' for Ian. I wanted to..."

"Like maybe yell at him to get away or, oh, I dunno, shoot him."

Merida chuckled darkly. "Aye, cause that would have been _so_ effective. You knew this was coming, Hiccup! Dinnae get mad at me now when I'm jus' doin' what I've always done - defending a friend. Maybe if ah hadn't defended you, we wouldnae be in this mess."

Hiccup looked hurt. "So you regret it, is that it? You regret helping me? You're the one that did this in the first place! Remember? You shot us first-"

Merida stood her ground. "-Aye. and I'm very glad I did to be honest."

"Really? _Really?_ You think that's comforting?"

"I didnae take the damn shot, Hiccup! Why is this such a big deal? You saw! I couldn't- _wouldn't_ kill a Viking!"

Toothless ground to a halt in mid air. They were so close to the castle now. Amongst the fray they could see familiar faces; in the air, a dragon assault team who circled around, pointing their fireballs both towards and away from the castle; in the stables, Angus was braying frantically, clopping back and forth, waiting for his princess to return. Perhaps the most jarring sight was the squadron of Scots who dotted every tower, including the one that had served many years as a retreat for the Princess, yet just a couple of weeks as the bonding point between the two heirs. Hiccup and Merida shared a glance. "You wouldn't?" He asked over his shoulder. She sighed.

"Of course I wouldn't. How could I, knowing you?"

In a heavy, fragile instant, Hiccup had contorted his body into something resembling comfortable just so he could see her face properly and do something so un-Hiccup that it caught them both by surprise.

He kissed her.

The distance between them was swallowed by the need of it, by the recklessness of it; every ounce of hesitation was abandoned as soon as his lips met hers. It was just from nerves that Hiccup kept his eyes open, but he was glad he did, or he wouldn't have witnessed what was perhaps the most amazing thing he'd ever seen: Merida's eyes widened in shock and for a terrifying moment, he thought that she would pull away, that he had messed everything up (_again!_), but the prince-less Princess' fear melted, her eyelids fluttering to a delicate close as she returned the affection. Daring, it seemed, came easier to him these days, and it was just one of the qualities that Merida realized she cherished about him. How confusing it was, to a girl who had previously denied "love". She had to finally acknowledge those terrible, unsettling feelings that had caused her to feel slight jealousy around Astrid, the feelings that she thought she'd never feel. But in his kiss she found a lifetime of freedom, of excitement, of adventure and discovery. In his kiss, she found the one thing she'd never dared to dream of. A boy, a man, a _suitor_, who didn't need to be taught how to understand her.

He just did.

26. Chapter 26

****Author's Note:**** Been another long wait for you all and I am genuinely sorry. Life has taken a rather unusual path of late and I'm trying to keep up, so please, hold on tight. It still amazes me that even when I haven't updated, I still get emails of your favourites, follows, and your lovely reviews - thank you all so much and please, keep them coming! :)

* * *

><p>In the moments after the kiss, neither Princess nor Viking spoke, and that was unusual for both; Hiccup could always find a quip to cover any situation, and Merida barely knew the meaning of the word 'speechless'. But in the air, lingering on the back of a supposedly-mythical beast and in the middle of a Scot-Viking conflict

that would surely be committed to legend, the pair could do nothing but look at each other. Hiccup hadn't wanted to pull away, fearing this very moment: Merida's eyes were fixed on his face, as if seeing him for the first time. Her expression was unreadable. The tension was unbearable. But, at the very least, she had kissed him, too. One hand anxiously rubbing the back of his neck, he considered the fact that it had been a long time since he'd felt this nervous, almost like being 14 again - he was a true viking now. Back on Berk, he had the flight suit and dragon-fire sword to prove it. And though they did exceedingly well when he was out in the field, neither could help him when it came to _girls._

"You kissed me." Merida said, her murmur cutting through his uncomfortable train of thought.

"You kissed me back!" His defensive cry was a reflex, one that was very concerning for Toothless. The dragon glanced at his boy, perpetually amused by his lack of know-how when it came to the opposite sex.

"Aye, I know that. But _you_ kissed _me_. Why?_"

"Why do you think?" He sighed in exasperation. "I mean, I could ask you why you kissed me back!"

Merida's stare became even more concentrated, deliberate.

"...Because I like you, alright?!"

"Aye, okay. Good. I just wanted to know that my feelings werenae misplaced."

_Feelings. _She had _feelings_ towards him. This was perhaps the strangest thing that Hiccup had ever heard and, in true analytic fashion, his mind was immediately overcome by a tidal wave of questions. 'What does she mean by that?', 'could there be a double meaning to this?' and, another one for his teenage self, 'she must be kidding, right?' With his mind drifting, he had left himself vulnerable - Merida leaned forward, tentatively, and placed an experimental kiss upon his mouth. This simple action sent chills up Hiccup's spine and he only had a moment to register her cracked, yet soft lips brushing against his before she was gone again. Like water cupped in the palm of the hand, she was so very hard to keep hold of.

Merida retreated into her own thoughts - she had kissed him. _She_ had initiated something _romantic._ How strange! She had denied those who offered their sons as potential husbands, sought a witch's otherworldly assistance and turned her mother into a bear all in the name retaining her freedom. But who said she had to enjoy her freedom alone? A small laugh bubbled in her stomach and it grew until she could not contain it - she laughed heartily, letting forth the joy of actually, legitimately being in love. "Well!" Merida said brightly. "Better go tell mum an' dad. They're gonna be thrilled. Could o' chosen someone to carry on the good royal name, but nah. I had tae choose the Viking."

In the space of what was maybe ten minutes, Hiccup had gone from unrequited-crush to _The Princess' choice. _Again, he spaced out

thinking about it - the irrepressible grin spreading across his face like wildfire. Merida giggled momentarily, then caught herself. It was a girly, irreverent sound; so unlike her usual hearty chuckles, belly laughs and her mother's despised chortle, but it didn't feel wrong. Maybe she wasn't always capable of making that sound? Or maybe she was - she just needed someone to get it out of her. She sighed happily, tucked a stray red curl of hair behind her ear and clapped her hands together, as if to say 'job done.' "Well, it's a miracle that nobody saw that. Best be getting on with it, no?"

Hiccup groaned. "But I _just_ got you to like me. Do we have to ruin it?"

She laughed. "Come _on_. _With motivation like _that,_ this willnae take long!"

"And what if your parents disapprove, stick you on a boat and send you off to some towering _rock_ in the middle of nowhere just so I can never see you again?"

"You've got a dragon. You'll figure it out."

Hiccup winced, then smiled crookedly. "Fair enough. Where to, _Princess?_"

"Eh... I think you'd best drop me off at the tower. You know the one."

"Is that wise? I mean, what's your plan?"

"Plan is to get in tae the castle and talk some sense into my parents. You?"

Hiccup glanced around the fields and castle below, every where a new handful of Vikings and Scots fighting against each other for no good reason whatsoever. He looked for the telltale signs of his father - a fresh wave of hope surged through him as, in the distance, a large, burly man came lumbering over the crest of a hill. But his hope faded immediately. "Um, can't see mine. But I can see yours." He pointed in the man's direction - King Fergus was leading a fresh charge against the Vikings. Merida swallowed. A mighty sword hefted skyward, her father was bellowing instructions to his men and blazing with pride. The Bear King loved a good fight - a number of scrapes and bruises were visible even from the Princess' far position, and she could see a rip right through the family tartan - but Merida knew he'd be looking for Stoick. A fight was only as good as the opponent faced. "Right then. I'll go speak to mah mum, you follow mah dad. Where he goes, your dad'll be."

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah."

"So I'll pick you up around, oh, I dunno, five, and we'll go on our first date; I was thinking maybe getting as far away from the wrath of our parents as physically possible?"

"Just get on with it."

Hiccup merely nodded, adjusted his position on Toothless, gave his

steed a pat on the neck and murmured. "Better do it then, bud." The dragon darted towards their favourite tower like an arrow, pleased to be doing something other than hovering. A sonic blast erupted from the belly of the beast, directed at the guards who stood atop their rendezvous point - the men scattered, a daring few raising their bows and trying to take a shot, but their many misplaced aims bounced harmlessly off the dragon's scaly hide. With the guardsmen taking cover, Merida was free to access the trapdoor: as soon as she got within an inch of the tower the redhead slid off Toothless' back gracefully (though her mother would have been left aghast by the amount of leg on show) and rolled as soon as she hit the stone, cat-like reflexes and dexterity ever impressive. But the gap between the viking and the princess felt more vast than it had ever been. In the conversation of their eyes, a thousand silent questions were asked, a thousand apologies said and a thousand wishes to see each other exchanged. Merida broke their eye contact only to grab the sword of a nearby cowering guard. "Take this," She said thickly. "You might need it." Hiccup didn't like the fear that came with her offering, but he bent over Toothless' side easily and grabbed the sword's hilt, sliding the weapon under the safest (and least painful) strap of Toothless' harness. But he bent over again. Hiccup slid his hand gently under her chin and lifted it just so; the new lovers shared an agonizingly quick kiss that would linger on both their mouths soon after they parted.

Merida swallowed audibly, with great difficulty and nodded once. Hiccup flew out of range without another word. She took a moment to clear her thoughts of all sadness and regret, and slipped back into her warrior persona as easy as she would her favourite dress; Hiccup took to the sky. She didn't watch him go. Instead she turned on her heel, ignoring the guards who shuffled back into their assigned positions before realizing-

"Princess!"

"Good afternoon, gents," she replied with a mock curtesy and a sly smirk, before disappearing down the trapdoor.

Down the rickety stairs she went and past the pile of rubble that was once the wall that concealed the tower entrance. It seemed that easy access to the roof had been a necessary battle step and Merida took a small, fleeting moment to mourn the loss of her sanctuary - and then ran down the hallways with ease. It was deserted. She both liked and disliked the emptiness. The only thing that would get in her way was the silence. It filled every nook and cranny in the stone walls and rid her home of laughter and joy - all her life the castle had been fit to burst with the sounds of life. Her childhood memories were always filled with music. But the battle had claimed that, too, turning something that was once so alive into nothing but a ghost. The eeriness spurred her on. Merida took every shortcut she knew and it didn't take long before she came to the throne room: the heart of their kingdom. It, too, was empty. The thrones of her parents did not look right without her parents in them. Ignoring her uneasiness, she continued down the steps, past the whisky cellar, past the private forge where Hiccup had made a wing for Toothless, and burst into the biggest room in the basement.

Everyone recoiled in horror as the heavy wooden doors swung open. Fear rippled through the assembled crowd like an earthquake. A cloud of dust shrouded the entry, and a familiar figure loomed through the

mist, the shadow's hair a thick, unmanageable mess. Queen Elinor did not dare to hope, but the embrace of her silenced boys became more subconsciously tighter. The dust cleared. Merida. The villagers, the people who didn't fight or couldn't, the castle staff and all the others erupted in a sound somewhere between a sigh of relief and a whoop of joy. Their Princess had returned.

"Oh, Merida!" Elinor set the triplets on the ground and they immediately scrambled towards their sister, who stumbled slightly backwards at the force of three rambunctious, overjoyed young boys attaching themselves to her legs. She couldn't help it. Merida grinned. "Hey now!" She said nonchalantly, patting Hubert's head; she was the only one who could tell the boys apart. "Did yeh miss me?" If the boys attempted to respond, Merida couldn't hear it from beneath the swathes of green silk now encompassing her head, smoothing down her hair and holding her in a hug so tight it felt like wearing a corset. But the breathlessness was beautiful. "Mum," the Princess breathed, sliding her arms around her mother. (Somewhere in the corner, an emotional Maudie swept a tear from her eye.)

"Oh Merida, you're back! I was so worried, I - oh mercy, look at you! You're filthy! Is that mud on your skirt? Is it torn? You'll wear that dress out if you're not careful-"

"Mum, please," Merida laughed, holding her mother at an arm's length just to get a good look at her face. Tears were streaming down the Queen's cheeks, her joy betraying the few wrinkles that held her smile taut; her delicate, nimble fingers covered her mouth in a gesture that Merida had seen a thousand times before, the one that tried to contain and hold the Queen. But there was no denying it. Elinor looked best like this - unreservedly, unmistakably happy. Merida tried to memorize this face, just so she'd remember what it looked like when she inevitably broke her mother's heart again.

"Oh, my precious wee girl," Elinor breathed. "You're home at last." She went back in for another hug, but Merida ducked out the way, suddenly feeling undeserving of her affection. There was no time to waste.

"Mum," Merida declared clearly, in a regal tone recalling all those boring, painful hours of diction and pronunciation lessons. "I have something to say. Would you sit?"

Taken aback, Elinor sat back down in the simple wooden chair she had vacated just moments ago. The boys crowded around her legs, wary of the shift in their sister's behaviour. "Yes?"

The Princess paused, thinking of how best to describe her situation. "Let me start with a fairly recent tale, of a clan invaded by those from across the sea..."

Silence settled over the gaggle of people, all rapt with the epic tale woven by Merida's words. She'd chosen to speak of a legend - the first Viking invasion.

"... and so, the invaders were driven away back to their own land, made to live with their decision, their loss, and the beasts who ravaged their kingdom. But it was all for naught. So many people were lost to a needless battle - and they live on in our history, our legend. We all know their story. Some of you lived it. Some of you -

myself included - were nothing but the sunlight that caught your mother's eye. But today, we relive the past, and again, needlessly. Those who fight now fight for their kingdom's lost heir - but I am here, I am well, I am _alive._ And so is Hic-the chief's son. He lives, too."

"And you have befriended the boy?" Queen Elinor interjected.

"No. I have not."

Elinor frowned - this did not align with her previous suspicions. "Is this to say you were out there _alone?"_

"Again, no. I have not been alone, and I have not befriended the _boy."_

"So-"

"-I have fallen in love with him."

Silence. Then gasping. Nervous glances from person to person, noiselessly asking 'has she gone mad?' Murmuring flowed through the room like a stream: a quiet, tense bubbling, mostly of displeasure. Merida hadn't feared the reaction - it was exactly as she expected. But then her mother stood. Queen Elinor paced back and forth, the sweeping of her dress along the floor sounding eerily like the ghostly song of the wisps, the delicate hands clasped tightly behind her back. The boys had hidden under the table in the middle of the room, their childish intuition knowing that something was _wrong._ Merida took a step back and breathed the smallest sigh she could, stealing a nervous glance at her mother's face. Elinor was muttering - but did not appear to be angry?

Elinor turned. She seemed taller and more imposing than ever, like a statue, like one of the mythic stones that circled in the forest. Immortal. Powerful. Strong. Merida braced herself for the worst.

"This is your choice?" The Queen inquired, voice measured and subtly commanding.

"We learned the hard way that love is not a choice," Merida said, speaking as if she and her mother were the only two present. "And even if it was, I would choose Hiccup."

"Hiccup," Elinor sighed. "I wish they chose better names for their young."

"Uh..." Merida's nose turned up and her eyes widened.

"Well, the name Hiccup is going to look just awful on the wedding invitations."

"WEDDING!"

"What's his last name?"

"Ha... haddock, why...?"

"_My lord. _You intend to be Princess _Haddock?"_

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh honestly Merida, you think I didn't know?"

Speechless. There it was again.

"The last time you fought with us over a boy, it was because you didn't want one. But you fought harder trying to keep one."

Merida mumbled and stuttered, fighting to get words - any words - to come from her mouth. But her voice had failed her once again, and she was left to deal with the revelation that her mother knew - and knew before even she had worked it out. "So then why is Dad fighting?" The Princess blurted at last.

Elinor waved her hand dismissively. "A matter of clan pride, dear. You know what your father's like, stubborn as an ox. We tried to communicate with Stoick - we really did - but once he heard about, ahem, the little incident involving you and Hiccup being... well, there was no stopping it." She shook her head and sighed mockingly. "Men."

"There's got to be something we can do!"

Elinor looked Merida up and down, eyes drifting across the mud and grass stains, snags in the wool of her dress, the misplaced underskirt and then over to the door, where her daughter had propped up her prized bow. "I must attend to the people, Merida. But if you wish to go out there then..." Deep breath. "I will not stop you."

"Isn' that a bit unladylike?" Merida murmured uncertainly.

The Queen half-smiled at her daughter. "In the conventional sense, yes. But perhaps I shouldn't have needed to become a bear to find out that you're not exactly conventional. The bow will stay off the table - but I know now that you must do what you feel like you need to do. Just do me the curtsy of putting on some armour-"

There was a shout of protest.

"-not that I think you'll need it. But if I can't protect you, then... something has to. Alright?"

Merida thought about it for a moment, then smiled softly; she wound her arms around Elinor again and settled into a comfortable, motherly cuddle. It was for her mum's 'new' understanding that Merida was most grateful - it wasn't always easy for the Queen, knowing when to allow Merida her space, but she was getting so good at it now that there would soon be no arguments at all. Elinor had become the mother that Merida had always wanted. Not different - Elinor was still as royal, proud and graceful as she had always been - but she was no longer so consumed by their title that she could not see her daughter for what she was. She was fiercely proud of her girl - the loving sister and daughter, the skilled fighter, the princess.

"Love you, Mum."

The teary smile returned. "And I love you too."

Out in the open, things weren't quite so simple; the battle raged onwards, two overly-proud peoples locking horns over their respective 'lost' heirs. The future Viking chief and his dragon hovered high above the action, out of range and feeling rather uncomfortable; Hiccup lamented the fact that he and Merida were to blame for the whole situation. It had seemed innocent before - he got "lost" (she had downed him), met a girl (she had sheltered him), couldn't get back home (she had given him the resources he needed). And now his tribe fought hers. The sky was bloated with the sound of anger, with the clash of sword-on-shield, with the blazing brightness from every new blast of dragon fire. Though Hiccup was distracted, Toothless remained vigilant; the night fury glided easily above the battlefield, tracking King Fergus and his band of ragtag warriors. They had come from the fields, bellowing DunBroch pride; they headed into the forest, searching for the Viking base. Toothless dropped so low that the treetops skimmed across his belly, eagerly watching, waiting, biding his time.

"We should hit the ground..."

Toothless tilted his head in order to see Hiccup's face, wondering if his rider was crazy or not. They had such an excellent vantage point from the air, why would they go in premature? But the boy's thoughts were not concentrated. They lingered at the castle with _her_. Toothless exhaled and forged ahead further.

"Come on, bud. Time to go."

No it wasn't. Toothless could see the wiry bronze hair of King Fergus weaving throughout the leaves and branches - it was a good decision to follow Fergus instead of seeking the Vikings themselves. The King knew the land better than almost everyone - only Merida bested him. But from the air, Toothless could clearly observe the King's path, and he could hear everything - the warriors, the cries of the dragons and vikings they sought. No, he'd keep going.

"Seriously, Toothless!"

Oh, _humans_. _Even the smartest of their kind could be naive. Still, Toothless saw no reason to disagree; the dragon found a good, clear area for entry and dipped beneath the cover of the trees. The landing was smooth and easy, in a part of the forest where the trees were further spaced; his wings stretched out easily in the distance between them. Toothless rumbled with pride at his great choice. Hiccup dismounted, straightened out his fur vest and patted his best friend's scaly head. "Alright. Better... yeah. Better follow them, then."

And off they went. They walked somewhat parallel to the King's group, on a narrower path that was slightly higher, provided a good lookout and was sufficiently far enough away from King Fergus to keep Hiccup from getting into trouble. Hiccup followed them with relative ease, though his prosthetic foot did get caught in the root of a tree once or twice, and while he took on lookout duties, Toothless was the ear of the operation: the sound of fellow dragons became clearer to him with every step they took, but it was not so loud that the humans could hear. A good ten minutes passed before he lost the trail of sound they were following.

Toothless butted his head into Hiccup's legs, causing the boy to stumble somewhat, but it was the best way to get his attention.

"What did you do that for?!"

The dragon made a sound something like a growl and a warning.

Hiccup looked out across the trees. "...Oh."

He hadn't been paying attention to his targets; they had wandered out of view while Hiccup was lost in his own head. Their little expedition was the first time that he'd had been without human company, his first opportunity to clear his head and just _be, _and soon, his thoughts had consumed him again. Astrid, his father, what a mess. Merida_. _Merida._ Merida._

"Can't you hear them, bud?"

Toothless strained to listen, but no. He couldn't hear the King and his men, he couldn't hear the dragons any more. But he could hear something else.

The dragon launched his large body into the lanky teen and Hiccup yelped his surprise, which certainly did not help the situation; Toothless growled again, more certainly. It was no mistake that Toothless had dived - both boy and dragon were now somewhat hidden behind a rather large, prickly bush; the dragon's wings folded over the boy just enough to cover Hiccup's body but not to obscure his vision or hearing, and for good reason.

A group of men came through the path that they had just been following, led by a boy that was sure to be around Hiccup's age. The leader was draped with red tartan, a good portion of his well-built upper body exposed in an almost arrogant manner, as if to boast the lack of armour and protection; blue swirls decorated the arm of his exposed side and his nose took up at least half his face (though Hiccup supposed, if seen through a girl's eyes, this one might have been considered attractive) but at least the long, semi-curly black hair was more than enough to distract from it.

All of these details paled into insignificance upon witnessing the nonchalant bravado with which the boy flicked and swung his sword. "Oh aye, if I get my hands on that kid, I'm gonnae run 'im through!"

With a jolt, Hiccup realized that he _recognized _the leader, both from the stories that Merida had told and from seeing him sit with the Princess at the feast. The name was on the tip of his tongue...

MacIntosh.

The leader's name was MacIntosh.

27. Chapter 27

****Author's Note:**** Dear readers, your patience is incredible and I

can't thank you enough for the favourites, follows and the reviews that keep me inspired to write this story. :) Tried something a bit different here, and hopefully you like this chapter - please let me know as I love, love, love hearing from you!

* * *

><p>Hidden beneath several layers of shrubbery and scales, it was with slight resentment that Hiccup recalled one of the many life lessons that Astrid had tried to teach him: fortune favours the bold, she'd said; being that she was the very embodiment of boldness, Hiccup had been inclined to believe her. And though fortune favoured her often, it didn't seem to like him very much. In his current state, Hiccup felt nowhere near **bold** and, as luck would have it, Young MacIntosh had chosen this very moment to make his entrance. The Scot swaggered through the forest path and came to a halt mere inches from the bush that concealed the Viking, the tips of the his boots and his rather skinny legs peeking through the interspersed gaps in the bush's leaves and twigs. Trying to breathe quietly and quell the rising nerves inside was a near impossible task for Hiccup - dragons he could handle. Dragons would play nice if you petted them the right way or fed them the right fish. Humans, however, were far, far more dangerous - knowing who the arrogant swordsman was, and that he was somewhat of a friend to Merida, did not help matters. It wasn't exactly Hiccup's intention to fight the guy: it wasn't really in his nature to go looking for trouble and according to MacIntosh, it wouldn't matter if it was. Instead, he made it quite clear that no-one could match him in battle.

"Aye, ah'm just gettin' a bit bored now, t'be honest. Just want it over 'n done wi', if you know what I mean - it's only a matter of time, right?" The Scot bragged to his group, most of whom just nodded and agreed. Toothless made sure to catch Hiccup's gaze and roll his eyes, mocking and unimpressed. Though he could clearly handle a weapon, Toothless didn't think much of the one with raven-hair and the noxious bravado that rolled off the boy like fog... really, he felt like it wouldn't be a bad idea to go and scare the arrogance out of the Scot (what man wouldn't run at the sight of a Night Fury?). But he held firm, protecting Hiccup. There was no need create a fight where it wasn't necessary. MacIntosh shuffled in his position just of out range and even with his obscured sight Hiccup could see the other guy throw his head back, tossing his curly black mane over his shoulder as he placed his hands on his hips.

"-Still. Can't imagine he'll be away too long - Merida's out there an' all, probably see the wee runt running in tae the village with his tail between his legs and a hide full o' arrows."

The other clansmen chuckled; both Hiccup and Toothless screwed up their noses. It seemed the MacIntosh had picked the group that'd suit him best - admirers, followers, yes men who'd laugh at every sentence to tumble from his mouth and otherwise stay silent just so he could enjoy the sound of his own voice. The worry that had been steadily growing in Hiccup's stomach like a flower bloomed into a different emotion entirely: anger. It had been a long, long time since anyone had spoke about Hiccup in a way that made him sound - and feel - worthless. Insignificant. Expendable. The seventeen year old Hiccup was far from worthless and now could even readily admit to his good qualities, instead of hiding his light under a bushel like he used to. He was intelligent, he was kind, and generous, and decent,

intuitive and honourable; he never went looking for a fight but never backed down from those who wanted to cause trouble. And these were the things that set him apart from the rest, the things that Merida also saw in him and treasured about him. Everything that MacIntosh wasn't.

Hiccup shuffled out from underneath Toothless, out from the bush that hadn't just concealed his body but contained his courage; he stood, dusting himself off briefly and threw back his head much like MacIntosh had, but with one big difference: it wasn't arrogant. It was confident. It was the reassertion of himself, the readiness, the body language that asked '__why hide?__' Toothless glanced up at the boy, unsure if this was entirely smart, but impressed - he'd been around Hiccup long enough to see the shift in his demeanor. If they were going to be found, let them be found. If they were going to fight, let them fight. The gods had led MacIntosh into the path and Hiccup intended to continue walking; they did not step out into view - they would not purposely put themselves in danger - but it was time to find his father and put this silly little fight to bed.

Regardless, it did not take long for them to be seen.

"Oi! There he is!"

"Oh dear," Hiccup sighed. They had gotten a good couple of metres away from the clansmen and for one glorious moment, it felt like the pair had made a clean getaway; emboldened or not, it seemed that fortune, the gods and the universe had decided that this was just a conflict he couldn't avoid... still, it had been nice to hope. He stopped. Toothless stopped. Thundering footsteps drew nearer and nearer until MacIntosh and the clansmen also came to a halt, slightly behind them and just as slightly out of breath - did they want to find him that badly? Both Hiccup and Toothless turned to face their 'foes' and the clansmen drew in a barely audible intake of breath, getting a good look at the boy who'd caused all the trouble. Not the 'skinny wee runt' that MacIntosh had been expecting, the one they called 'Hiccup' was actually just kind of lanky, with a little muscle here and there - the arms were particularly curious, a fine display of upper body strength that could only be the result of many years as a blacksmith's apprentice - nothing like the burly, brawny leaders of their respective kingdoms, but toned nonetheless. The similarities of their bodies was evident, but well-matched or not, the one thing that MacIntosh hadn't been expecting was the air of determination. Something about this boy was to be respected, and that was very, very much like the Viking chief.

Both parties stood and stared for a good minute. MacIntosh was evaluating his opponent. Hiccup was counting the men. Six in total. Three each - Toothless started growling, and the sound of it seemed to awaken them to the fact there was a dragon present - all their lives, the Scot men had been raised to believe that dragons were a myth (a non-truth told by the fathers who had fought in the first conflict) and yet, here it was. And none of the airborne dragons looked a thing like this. A big black beast the likes of which hadn't been seen since Mor'du, with glinting scales and sharpened fangs, with outstretched wings that extended and motioned threateningly, as if daring them to take even a step closer. Not one of them could - in fact, one of the clansmen dropped his spear and fled. Five now. The Viking pair shared a smirk from the corners of their eyes, and

MacIntosh wasn't impressed.

"_So_," The Scotsman declared loudly, and even with the gap he seemed like a circling vulture; the nervous men seemed to rally somewhat. MacIntosh stalked closer and Toothless growled louder. The men took a step back. "_You're _the one causin' all the commotion."

"That's me." Hiccup said calmly, looking MacIntosh straight in the eye, holding his position with a tilted chin that indicated his lack of fear. How could he be scared with a _Night Fury_ by his side?

"Well, you're no much to look at, are you?" The other man laughed. "Can't see why she'd make such a fuss over you."

"Merida?" He asked, feigning innocence. "The... the redhaired girl?"

"The _Princess._" MacIntosh sneered. "Dinnae pretend. We're all aware that you _fled-_ the particular emphasis on this was strong, and the clansmen gave an obligatory laugh - they were enjoying the fact that Hiccup and Merida had run away. "-with her. We all know you know her."

"Oh yeah, I know her."

"_Well?_"

"Well if you see her, could you give her a message: Hey Merida. I love you. Sincerely, not-much-to-look-at Viking scum."

The matter-of-fact way in which Hiccup had said this - and with a smile on his face, too - had caused MacIntosh' face to flare through a thousand different shades of red, leaving him looking like a volcano ready to erupt. Hiccup couldn't resist. He folded his arms and tapped his jaw, pretending to ponder and inspect, mimicking the vulture-like way he had been surveyed just moments ago. "You know... that tartan really brings out the colour in your cheeks..."

The Scot bellowed with rage, drew the sword that he had slung in his belt and lunged.

The 'lanky' body served him well - built for speed and evasion, Hiccup dived and MacIntosh went stumbling, giving the Viking just enough time to slide the sword from Toothless' harness. In a split second, the dragon and the boy shared a nod and Toothless leapt forward, keeping the other clansmen at bay. Another two ran. Two left plus the arrogant, black haired one - and Toothless was sure that they were no match for a dragon. MacIntosh had recovered, and was now swinging his sword through the air in a show that Hiccup supposed was meant to intimidate him, but served no purpose other than to make the Scot look really, really ridiculous. It wasn't hard to figure MacIntosh out. All tricks, no skill. Hiccup dared to make the first move -

Metal-on-metal noise rippled through the air and Toothless turned his head to look, seeing that MacIntosh and Hiccup were now locked in a crossed swords standoff; neither one pushed against the other, not yet. Their faces were close enough to make a good threat: MacIntosh snarled, hissing and spitting like a cat that just got it's tail

stood on. Hiccup _was_ slightly intimidated, but not frightened enough not to see the humour - this guy was just so _vain! _Oh, he could see the type clearly, the kind of person who'd been given everything he'd ever wanted and been praised for absolutely no reason, leaving him with the entitlement, the idea that everyone everywhere owed him absolutely everything - this rather unpleasant thought curled Hiccup's lip and he broke the clash, deftly ducking to the side with his false foot barely giving him any trouble at all. Some days were better than others and it seemed _finally,_ that something other than Toothless was on his side. But the moment he'd taken to thank his leg had left him open: a searing pain flared across his shoulder like the fire that burned the sky orange; MacIntosh stood back with a bitter, proud look on his face. Hiccup stood stunned, one hand automatically, unthinkingly going to clutch at his shoulder, his fingers and palms running scarlet with blood. The gash was deep and painful, and the small flex Hiccup tried to test it sent another wave a pain rolling through his body. But it wasn't on his dominant side.

Hiccup struck and missed.

He tried again, but MacIntosh parried the blade.

Toothless had been preoccupied with the two clansmen who dared challenge him (one of whom now had a finely-chewed leg, the other a massive paw-shaped bruise on his back and several teeth missing) but something had caught his attention, a scent that he didn't like to be familiar with: blood. With one massive sweep, Toothless snarled and flicked his tail around, knocking the clansmen to the ground and leaving him free to ensure Hiccup's safety - he turned to scan his rider's body but oh, there it was. Instantly obvious. If only he'd been wearing the flight suit, the hard leather might have spared Hiccup some of the pain! But he was only clad in the same day clothes he had been wearing the day they'd left Berk, and the green fabric of the boy's sleeve was now tinged a sickly brown. Fury surged through the dragon and he took a leap forward, wanting to be by Hiccup's side but one of the men - the only one remaining, as the bruised one had been knocked out cold by the impact of being thrown to the ground - had pounced onto his back. Regrettably, Hiccup would have to fight alone - Toothless bucked and reared like a horse, desperately trying to fling the fighter from his body.

It seemed the cut had drained Hiccup of his energy and he was just so _tired. _Tired of fighting, tired of running, tired of everything. He just wanted to take Merida and Toothless and just _go. _Just get out of here, leave it all behind and find a new place with explorable heights and plentiful resources and where the weather, the land reflected their own kingdoms... but his love of Berk, and her love of Scotland, and his love of her, and her love of him were all too great to ignore. Tired or not, he'd press on, keep fighting. Not only for Merida, but for Berk and his father as well - it was merely holding to the belief that the two kingdoms did not need to be enemies. Fergus and Stoick were men cut from the same cloth, the kind to be fast friends if they weren't such deadly a drawn sigh, Hiccup tried to relight the fire in his belly and struck out wildly, aiming for MacIntosh' shoulder. And so it continued like this for far, far too long: one of them would strike, the other would parry with a smattering of scratches and scars in between; Toothless never wavered from his fight. Both clansmen were up and about again, and without much regard to his own safety, it was the dragon's only concern to

keep Hiccup safe as much as he possibly could - the trees suffered greatly for this. Almost every branch within a one mile radius smouldered and blackened with the heat of Toothless' blue plasma special. The ring of damaged trees grew ever bigger as both the dragon and his rider noticed the change in scenery and realized that not only did the clansmen keep pressing them, they were directing them, using the distraction of their respective battles to subtly move the pair backwards through the forest. It was devastating: Hiccup was questioning his own good nature again, wondering just why he couldn't do it, why he was so reluctant to actually hurt anyone. Stoick would have. Astrid certainly would have. Ruffnut and Tuffnut - without question. Snotlout would have tried, maybe even Fishlegs. And it wasn't like Hiccup was incapable of doing it - he'd trained with a sword now for a good couple of years and was sure that he could overcome MacIntosh, if he really wanted to. But he didn't. He just couldn't find it in himself, the bloodlust that should have been his Viking birthright.

Yet another resounding clank of metal and the pair were locked against each other again, and tired Hiccup just wanted to end it - thinking of Merida and Stoick and Astrid and hell, even himself for once, he gritted his teeth and forced the fury that he needed and twisted his wrist, deftly clattering MacIntosh' sword to the ground. Toothless heard it and barked tremendously, expelling a blast of plasma from his gut just from the sheer pride of knowing Hiccup had done it. The dragon didn't even need to look to know. He just did. MacIntosh gasped as the Viking's blade sliced his arm open: an even match, right down to the injury.

The yell of satisfaction that the Viking had almost allowed himself was swallowed by the fact that the momentary shock had vanished from the Scot's face just to be replaced by the most prideful, arrogant, vain and twisted grin the Hiccup had ever seen - why did he look so proud? Hiccup took an instinctive step back and found out why almost instantly, as he tripped backwards and hit the ground with a bump to his tailbone. "Ugh," he grunted, rubbing his back somewhat before it dawned on him: the thing that he'd tripped over was sickeningly familiar. A tail. Long, green, decorated with black spots and reddish-brown plates. A Hideous Zippleback. Barf and Belch?

It seems that MacIntosh and his men had been driving them back for good reason. They had directed them right into the heart of the battle - the Viking camp.

Instantly, Hiccup rose to his feet and turned, taken aback by the sight: The Vikings had made themselves quite comfortable in one of the many hidden clearings, with the flattest rocks being used as tables, strewn with pieces of parchment outlining various plans of attack; dragons were dotted here and there, the wounded being tended to by a small group of men and women; people gathered around, shouting their best strategies and dearest worries over one another and finally the teenagers, most of whom had been assigned to guarding the weapons. Astrid. Hiccup could have sworn he felt his heart stop beating at the sight of her. But in the midst of all the madness stood the one person man Hiccup needed to see - Stoick. The chief was standing straight, tall and proud with a shield in one hand, an axe in the other, looking pretty much like he always did (with a few new scratches). And though outwardly he looked normal, the eyes were positively terrifying. Grey, cloudy and glazed, like he was looking but not seeing, Stoick's eyes had a certain sheen of derangement.

There was pain there, oh yes, but obscured by the anger and rage. So what exactly was he looking at?

And this was when Hiccup finally became aware of the situation. A handful of people had brought the fight here; wounded members of both the clan and the opposing tribe had fallen to the wayside. The Vikings were putting up such a good fight, but most of their mass were fighting in the village or at the castle, leaving them - the Chief, his strategists, the young and the few - vulnerable.

Scotsmen ringed the clearing, some obscured by trees, all of them lying in wait.

"Oh, dad..." Hiccup whispered, not trusting himself to say anything else.

28. Chapter 28

****Author's Note:**** After what seems like an unusually long break, I'm finally back with a new chapter and, as ever, a fresh new apology for the delay. To be honest with you, I've kind of been distracted... by new story ideas! RotBTD, of course, but not necessarily Mericcup. Who else likes to multiship? Mericcup are my forever OTP, but I do so love exploring the dynamics of different relationships. _Sigh._

As always, your reviews and favourites are genuinely astounding. (Big shout out to those of you who've reviewed many, if not all of the chapters - I hope you know who you are!) Thanks for reading - I'm sure we'll be reaching a conclusion soon...

* * *

><p>At the Viking camp, time was trickling by at a snail's pace: anticipation drifted through the air like fog, everyone waiting for just the right moment to strike; the Scotsmen held their weapons high in readiness. Stoick flexed the knuckles that gripped his hammer, his eyes - deranged and determined in equal measure - flicked back and forth, watching, waiting. Hiccup wanted to call his father's attention but couldn't. Stoick would have ignored all else to see his son - and left himself open to attack. A shudder rippled through the lean and lanky teen's body at the thought of his powerful, imposing father left vulnerable; he was grateful just to have Toothless by his side, ever the watchful protector. Night furies weren't exactly common, and Toothless' plasma blasts gave them somewhat of an edge; he'd only do what he had to to protect Hiccup, not for the mere fact of getting in a fight - it had taken him long enough to shake off the clansmen. They waited. Hiccup drummed his fingers against his leg. A draw of breath... and the world erupted into violence. Scotsmen flooded the area, swinging swords and battering shields into anyone who came close; Stoick swung his heavy hammer with relative ease. Astrid's battle cry rung out above the noise and just seconds later, an axe flew overhead, lodging into the shield of an enemy. He toppled easily.

The younger, more inexperienced Hiccup would have panicked, maybe hid behind a device of his own design and hoped for the best. But he had grown up. He was a dragon conqueror now, a future chief, a Princess' boyfriend; he was all of these things and many, many more. Without skipping a beat, Hiccup knelt down beside a fallen Viking and, having

lost the sword Merida had given him, scooped up the now-unused sword and shield. Weapons always felt wrong in his hands, but there was no denying now that he could use them - and just to prove it, Hiccup raised his shield as a Scot lumbered forward to attack and punched him in the stomach with it. The sword would remain unused as long as it could - if Hiccup could stop this fight with little blood on his hands, that's what he would do. He charged headfirst into the throng of men circling the other Viking teens, leaving Toothless to fight as he saw fit; the dragon crouched low like a cat, ready to pounce. Wings extended to half-mast. Teeth bared. Claws out. Eyes narrowed. Alert to the fight, alert to Hiccup's safety, the dragon leapt into battle alongside Barf and Belch, the Hideous Zippleback belonging to the twins. Green smog billowed from one of their heads, followed by a vague sparking sound. The gas ignited and Toothless ducked just in time to avoid being caught in the explosion of fire.

Hiccup was kicking men left and right, hunkering down behind his shield and using his body weight to slam into anyone who dared corner his friends - Astrid was in there. He could hear her grunts, the vague gasps of breath that she used to blow the hair from her face. His heart pounded, knowing that once he was on the other side, there would be no welcome; she would, for all intents and purposes, ignore his existence. It hurt. She was the person who'd spurred him on and encouraged him throughout most of his teenage years, and though Astrid hadn't wanted to know him at first, there was an obvious connection between the two. Hiccup loved Astrid so much. Not in the same way he loved Merida - (though he thought he had, once), but he loved her. And she loved him, too. He knew that. Astrid wasn't a best friend or a former girlfriend but something else, a relationship without definition: they'd always be there for each other. Always. Hiccup fought hard to break through the crowd, getting more agitated with every glint of blonde hair peeking through the gaps; soon enough, with one last punch to some guy's face, he saw his friends.

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs gasped. Hiccup stopped for a moment, eyes widened. To his amazement, Fishlegs held a shield in one hand, a spear in the other, with a fire in his eyes; what a delight it was to see the most gentle of his friends fight just as bravely as everyone else. He had, unfortunately, set off a chain reaction.

"Hiccup?" Ruffnut asked.

"Hiccup?!" Snotlout exclaimed.

"Hiccup!" Tuffnut yelled.

The call from Astrid never came. She just looked at him, narrowed blue eyes burning furiously. They stared at each other in silence until she broke the connection, not willing to look at him anymore. Just as expected, a tight band contracted around Hiccup's heart. Hurting Astrid was, by far, the worst thing he'd ever done.

"I'm sorry."

She did not respond.

Hiccup sighed sadly as the friends who did, in fact, want to speak to him enveloped him with a barrage of questions like, 'where have you been?', 'what are you doing here?' and, in the case of the twins,

'how cool is this?!' Blood was smeared down Ruff's face in two streaks - she told Hiccup later that it was there on purpose, the result of a wounded enemy and the desire to look more intimidating (it worked) - and Tuff was covered in bruises, missing several teeth. They were enthusiastic about the battle, always happy to have the chance to inflict some damage. Hiccup flinched at that. These were Merida's people. He didn't want to hurt them, and he didn't want his friends to hurt them either, but they had no choice. A clansman charged at them with a club, and Astrid ducked, quickly kicking him in the gut and sweeping her leg around his shin to send him to the ground. She then took his club and hit her victim over the head, effectively knocking him out;; Astrid forcefully kicked his unconscious form and he rolled away, crashing into several people, both Viking and Scot. In this moment, Hiccup was reminded of the fierce warrior that she was, and of the brutality of it all.

"Awesome," Tuffnut sighed.

"Just a second too quick there babe, I totally had it under control," Snotlout blustered, arrogantly sweeping a lock of stray black hair back under his helmet.

Everyone rolled their eyes, settling into what Hiccup supposed was a comfortable formation - like a dragon's body, everyone had a function: Hiccup supposed he was the brain, though Fishlegs could easily have claimed the same spot - the bulky, blonde male was a veritable fountain of dragon knowledge. Hiccup could at least claim to be intuitive and admittedly, kind of risky - Fishlegs wasn't suited to that type of leadership. He was more like the heart. Astrid, perhaps in contrast with her warrior-like attitude, would be the eyes - she the most observant; she was precision personified and rarely (_if ever!) _missed a target. The twins were obvious: they were the fire, simply due to their penchant for destruction, and Snotlout... well, he could be the ego.

Most of the teenagers looked at Hiccup, the brain, the unassuming leader, as if waiting for him to plan their next move. "Uhh... what next?" He wondered aloud, rubbing the back of his neck. The post-MacIntosh defeat glory had worn off.

Astrid grunted. "Isn't it obvious? We fight."

As the blonde Viking charged forward, her friends behind her, another journey was beginning. Merida emerged from the Armoury in clothes befitting a warrior, one at least twice her size: a mixture of chainmail and plate armour hung from her average frame, the helmet she wore doing a poor job of concealing her hair; the DunBroch tartan was draped from shoulder to hip, serving as a grim and glorious reminder of all the things worth fighting for. She was wearing her clan pride on her chest for all to see, and her sense of purpose was renewed once more: it was time to find her father, look him straight in the eye and tell him that in no time at all, she'd fallen in love with a boy who was meant to be her sworn enemy.

If that wasn't enough, Merida also had her hair to contend with: she had become accustomed to her vivid mane drawing it's own attention. It's vivacious colour and extraordinary mass seemed to act of something of a beacon, as if lost villagers who needed to find their way would simply seek the hair of the Princess; even though she

didn't always like it, Merida had accepted her fate this way. That's why it was no surprise that almost everyone stopped to stare as she and Angus hotfooted through the village - the horse wasn't nearly odd enough to garner solo attention, but his rider certainly was; beneath her new clothing, it was hard to make out the figure, but the red hair spoke of the unknown man-at-arms being Merida. The villagers were shocked, the Vikings confused and as the warriors stood stupefied, a semi-clear path emerged through which Angus thundered, both silently thanking their lucky stars for such freedom of movement - even for two beings who knew the forests better than they knew themselves, they were making record time. The only problem was actually finding who they were looking for.

"This way, Angus," Merida said as the pair ventured deeper into the heart of the woodland. "They'll be somewhere near the center."

The horse whinnied in response.

After that, time slowed immeasurably. The sound of fighting had often been carried to them, then stolen away by the wind; Angus had trotted this way and that for miles, diverting down paths and going around in circles; Merida had leapt off him in frustration and attempted to follow her instincts on foot, but still, no luck. The forests that had offered her sanctuary had turned against them.

Merida's anger quickly manifested in several shots to several trees and an almighty scream. "Argh!"

Angus communicated in silence, perhaps the best way to get her attention: the horse trotted close to his princess and nuzzled his head into her shoulder, trying to soothe her tempestuous nature; Merida put her arms around his thick neck and sighed deeply, the weight of her worries escaping her body in one gasp. "Oh, Angus," she murmured. "I just want to find him."

After an encouraging nudge from the Clydesdale, Merida relented and climbed back onto her mighty steed. His glassy black eyes spoke volumes, and soon they were headed onward again. The paths that they themselves had created over years of trekking were betraying them, the forest now labyrinthine; her spirits had sunk lower than ever. "Umm," She murmured - they had approached a new fork in the road. "This way?" Merida pointed down the path off to the right, unsure if it was the correct one to take or not. Angus, however, had had a change of heart: he had never been a fan of the otherworldly, but it seemed that his princess attracted such magic like a moths to a flame. The Standing Stones, the true heart of the forest, had always provided her with something - never outright answers, but ways to get the answers she sought. Discoveries. It seemed, to him, that they were the place to go. Angus whinnied his disapproval at the right path and instead veered down the left.

"Oi, yeh big loony! What are yeh doin'?" She hissed.

The Princess' tendency for adventure had consumed his own animal instincts long ago, but they had returned with a vengeance: Angus could feel that this was the right thing to do. They'd be waiting for her. They'd lead her to the boy. But that didn't mean she'd necessarily stick around and, upon realizing Merida's innate ability to do her own thing, the horse started to sprint in what he knew to be the right direction.

"Slow down!" She grunted, raising her arms to cover her face. She'd learned the hard way that, if you went fast enough, the branches turned to whips. Even now they lashed at her skin - the sleeves of her new warrior garb were already marred with slashes and cuts. (Merida could deal with the pain - the slashes did make her look pretty cool.) "Where yeh' goin?!"

Angus became quicker with every step and soon, the girl had to flattern herself against his body to prevent any serious damage. It seemed he had forgotten all about his rider and her welfare on this newfound quest of his - the Clydesdales' behaviour was so strange. Merida could feel some sort of purpose radiating from him, and it was actually rather reassuring - for once, she chose not to question him. And for good reason.

Soon, as they had done many times before, they slowed to a halt before the Standing Stones.

"Here? You brought us here?"_

Merida gripped the rein tightly for balance and swung halfway over the horse's body, teetering precariously as she caught his eye. A puff of air expelled from his nose and Angus stared back.

"_Thank you."_

Both stood silent as the stones themselves as they waited, knowing exactly what it was they were waiting for. It seemed they had sensed her presence - a blue flame flourished from the grass with a whisper, and immediately Angus resented the need for being here. Everyone, human, animal or otherwise, knew that they were of questionable intent. Many a man had been lead to death by the wisps' hand. Angus whinned a warning and Merida patted him reassuringly.

"Do you know where he is?" She asked, clearly addressing the wisp.

She had seen this a good few times in her life, but still the Princess could not deny the severe beauty; a trail of wisps had blossomed behind the first and Merida had to remind herself that they weren't always good. But... this was the first time they had come when she'd been looking for them. It was like they'd grown accustomed to her now, like they shared a bond. She sighed and, not feeling the need to say anything more, prompted Angus into following them.

The wisps dissipated beneath his hooves as they trekked along, but it had definitely been the right thing to do. The sound of Viking versus Scot battle had reached them again and Merida knew they were getting closer. With every step, it felt like her gut became more knotted - how ready she was to see Hiccup again! How the thought of him fighting churned her stomach! It was the most awful happiness she'd ever felt, they most agonizing walk she'd ever taken. They were closer, but no less in trouble. At least one good thing had come of it so far: Angus was getting a big, big meal later.

A long green something slithered across their path and with a jolt, Merida realized that it was a dragon. Her heart leapt into her throat, and, fighting to control herself, she nudged her feet into

Angus' sides. "Faster," she gasped. "We're almost there!"

Angus complied, and what had been a tentative walk turned into a frenzied gallop. Merida allowed the branches to snag at her hair and clothes. There was no way she would be ducking behind anything or obscuring her vision - she wanted to see him. She needed to see him. And her father...

King Fergus had taken his time to observe the fight, to analyze the patterns with which the Viking warriors attacked; from the cover of the trees, the Bear King watched as his counterpart, the Chief, had swung into battle. He wasn't even slightly scared of Stoick, and the feeling was mutual; the two could fight until the end of time and never have a victor. They were too... _even._ They were bulky and strong, both hardened to the loss of war. Fergus grimaced and gripped the hilt of his sword. It was time to join in. With an almighty bellow that immediately called the Chief's attention, Fergus charged into the clearing. Stoick immediately swept away those he had been fighting. The real challenge had arrived. The respective leaders ran towards each other with their weapons held high -

Stoick struck the first blow, battering his hammer into the Scot's shoulder and sending him only very slightly off course. For a man with only one leg - a wooden one, at that - Fergus was very stable. He regained his footing easily and lunged forward, managing to get the Viking chief into a headlock.

"It doesnae have tae be like this, Stoick!"

The Chief bucked, throwing the Bear King off his back. Fergus fell to the ground, raising his sword quickly enough to parry Stoick's attempted blow.

"And what about my son?" The Viking snarled.

Using the weight of his one good leg, Fergus kicked Stoick in the shin and the chief stumbled, giving Fergus enough time to get back up.

"I dinnae have your son! I don't even know where he is!"

Stoick howled in outrage, swinging his hammer violently. Fergus dodged, landing a swift and powerful punch to the face. The Viking chief gritted his teeth and threw his hammer to the ground.

"You want to do it like that, do you?"

"Aye. Fight like a man!"

Their weapons and their dignity forgotten, Fergus and Stoick launched into a brutal fistfight. Punches rained down upon both men, and very few opportunities came for them to get a good move in - Fergus managed to strike Stoick in the mouth with his elbow, quickly flicking his hand upward for a blow to the nose; Stoick countered by kicking Fergus in the gut and sending him backward into a tree. Warriors of both clan and tribe largely ignored the fight of their leaders - many were too preoccupied with their own opponents, and even more understood that the King and Chief had to fight on their own terms - but Hiccup couldn't look away. He'd only briefly caught a glimpse of the King entering the 'arena' before he heard Stoick's

shouts. Seeing Merida's father fight with his own was both painful and not painful at all - it was his 'girlfriend's' father, alright, but both men could hold their own. Alone, Hiccup could have intervened - Stoick would have calmed by the arrival of his son, but the fight was too intense. Just as he'd thought before, there was no good that could come of diverting Stoick's attention. The most painful thing of all was swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat - Hiccup would wait for the opportune moment.

Merida did not exactly operate in the same way.

Instead, she appeared right by his side without warning. "Hic!" She whisper-cried, throwing her arms around the boy from behind - much to Astrid's displeasure - and causing Hiccup to freeze in horror, momentarily, before he determined the source of the voice. He couldn't see her face, but the accent was unmistakable, the wonderfully reassuring smell of pine and all things woodsy enveloping him. She was there.

"Merida!" He croaked.

The grin on her face was irrepressible as she squeezed him tight. Hiccup couldn't help blushing - seventeen years old and he still couldn't handle public displays of affection (though, to be fair, he didn't exactly experience them often) - and he wanted to hug her back. But she was holding on too tight for him to breathe, let alone move. It was the most wonderful feeling.

"I might be asking a stupid question here, but _who is that?_" Fishlegs asked, the Viking teenagers aware of the newcomer. Astrid just huffed.

"Uh, guys... this is _Merida._" Hiccup stuttered, an awkward cough ending his sentence. But still the way he said her name sent chills down her spine; the Princess smiled, reluctantly letting him go. Hiccup freed, he turned to take a good look at the enigmatic redhead - she felt more alive in this moment than she had in days - but was taken aback by her appearance.

"Um, Mer... your... helmet."

"Oh!" Merida gasped, and she pulled her helmet off, the Viking teenagers recoiling at the sight of her. Hiccup and Merida looked at each other and laughed, their eyes communicating a thousand different things that they couldn't say out loud.

"Well!" The Princess called, clapping her hands together briskly. "It's... nice to see yeh all exist - rest assured that Hiccup's told me all about you - you've gotta be Fishlegs, right? And the famous twins - got triplet brothers maself..."

Fishlegs squeaked at the mention of his name and the glances between the Viking teenagers were those of extreme bewilderment - they hadn't expected her to speak. Many wondered why the redhead wasn't attacking the group - she was a Scot, after all, their sworn enemies. But instead this stranger spoke to them like an old friend.

"Your hair is awesome." Ruffnut blurted, her eyes glassy like a magpie that had just spotted something shiny. "So _red._" (Tuffnut simply stared at his twin like she'd dropped from the sky.)

"Uh... thanks," Merida replied, half-wary, half-joking. "I like yer plait- I mean... braids."

Hiccup recoiled at the awkward exchange between the two sides. Even in such a strange situation, his friends weren't exactly making this easy; slowly, a smile spread across Ruffnut's face. In fact, she even looked flattered at the compliment and the dangerous blonde nodded curtly at Hiccup, as if giving him her approval. He looked away - somewhere else, anywhere else.

"_Well,_ " Hiccup gasped at last, drawing out the word. "I think we've had enough Merida for just now - can we go? (Gods, please say we can go...)"

"Aye, ah reckon there'll be time for a formal meetin' later, y'know, after the fight and stuff. Hiccup tells me you know a lot about dragons, Fishlegs, and yeh can bet I wanna hear that!-"

Fishlegs blushed.

"-but yeah, for now, I think we'd best be goin'. Dad and yer Chief are fightin' so... bigger fish tae fry 'n' all that."

Merida grabbed Hiccup's hand - earning an angry huff from Astrid - and pulled him through the masses of fighting people, taking care to help him dodge around on his prosthetic leg. It was a hard task, bobbing and weaving through the crowd - both Hiccup and Merida kicked a few people from their path - but they largely went unnoticed. The adults of both clan and tribe tended to underestimate the younger generation, even with all their accomplishments - normally, this would annoy both Hiccup and Merida, but today it served them well. In no time at all, they'd escaped horde, coming to a stop by the edge of the forest where their fathers were fighting. Calling them wouldn't make the entire fight stop, wouldn't put to bed the issues that they had; Toothless appeared at Hiccup's side and the Viking's throat thickened. His dragon, his loyal protector, his best friend. At his side as always. "Thanks, bud."

A moment of silence passed, Scot and Viking thinking the same thing.

"Want a ride?" Hiccup asked quietly.

Merida's eyes flicked to what laid beyond the clearing's edge, and Hiccup looked too - Angus was there, in the cover of the trees, anxiously pacing back and forth. It seemed that even from this distance, her presence reassured the horse. She sighed.

"Yep."

Hiccup was reminded of how easily things could change - it seemed like just days ago since he left Berk, fleeing the pressure of being a Chief's son - and Merida could be stolen away from him at a moment's notice. He kissed her so quickly it felt like he hadn't done anything at all, but the widening of the Princess' blue eyes and the smile on her lips were all the proof he needed; Hiccup bowed awkwardly, gesturing at the saddle on Toothless' back.

"Your... chariot, I guess - my, uh... lady?"

The redhead laughed heartily; he vowed to remember the sound, the way her curls bounced around her shoulders.

"Nice try."

Still, she took the hand he held out to her and climbed onto Toothless back, noting that the night fury seemed to be smiling, too; Hiccup followed, sitting in front of her. It suited them well - he sat in front to do the steering, talented flier that he was; she sat at the back, gripping her bow just in case. No words were needed - the dragon rose into the air without further instruction, hovering about the battle like a storm cloud ready to unleash the rain. Merida looked at Hiccup. "Shall I, or do you..."

"No, you-" He sighed, holding on to Toothless for dear life. "-you go right ahead."

**"OI! UP HERE!"

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End
file.